

# Africa *woman*

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## Free education: Who calls the shots?

By Grace Githaiga

It was not until the new government fulfilled its free education pledge early this year that the true extent of Kenyans' thirst for knowledge became apparent: children trooped to school barefoot and minus uniform; from the ages of two-and-a-half to 18, they sought registration for standard one. The directive was categorical: rather than

send away anyone, schools would have to be creative in accommodating the crowds.

A local daily carried the story of an 18-year-old who registered in the same class with her child. Urban women used to ferrying house helps from the rural areas suddenly found themselves in trouble as girls sent out to work by their families returned home to make a bee-line for school.

### KENYA

Predictably, the majority of schools were unable to cope with the onslaught both in terms of facilities and teaching staff. There was no money to recruit new teachers and those already on the job were overwhelmed by the work load. Nevertheless, Kenya had taken a critical step in the direction of giving all children a chance to go to

school.

Like many other developing nations, Kenya relies on international funders and donors to support its free primary education programme. There are different categories of international organisations that support the cause of free education. They include church related organisations, humanitarian organisations, bilateral donors and the Bretton Woods institutions.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child says all children have the right to an education and to develop their personality and talent to a full potential. Article 28 stipulates that governments, "shall ... make primary education compulsory and available to all". One of the document's main goals is to eliminate "ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world".

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## It's time for Africa to invest in education, not war

*Less than 60% of children in school*

By Sibongile Ncube, Zimbabwe

THE play of statistics to do with education can be quite illuminating, if slightly bemusing: primary school enrolment may have increased in sub-Saharan Africa by three percentage points since the beginning of the 1990s, but this still means that less than 60 percent of children are in school.

According to the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report 2003, 115 million of the 680 million children of school going age in developing countries do not attend classes. Of that number, a good three-fifths are girls. Moreover, not all children who enrol complete their studies. Just over half of the children who start primary school finish it and in sub-Saharan Africa only one in three gets to do so.

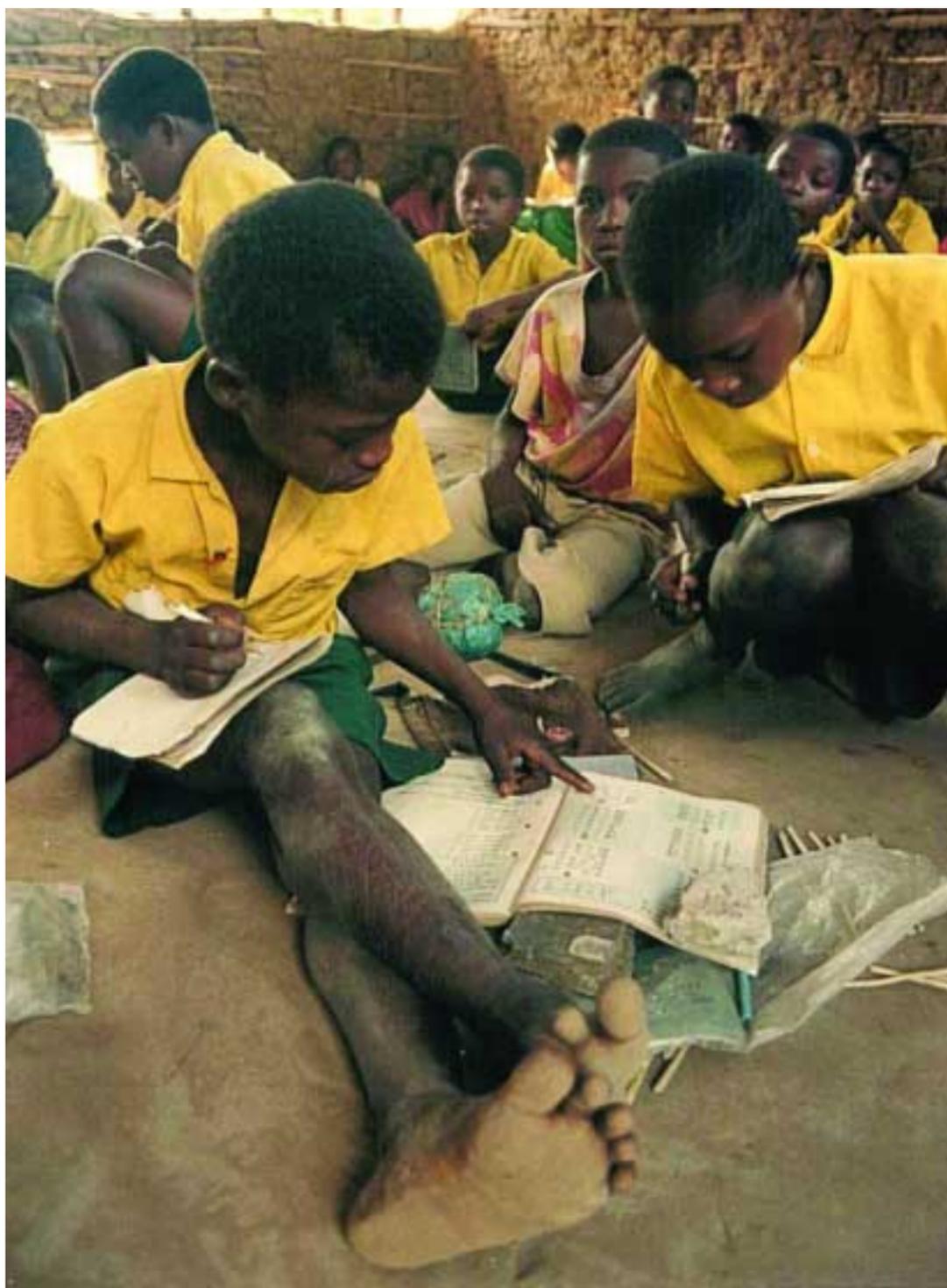
What the statistics fail to bring out, however, is the power play that

attends African governments' decision on where to put their money. Even though education is a basic human right, African governments continue to spend extensively on the military rather than on establishing the building blocks of a more meaningful future for children.

Economist Witness Chinyama argues that African governments must get their priorities right and put more resources in social services such as basic education, which is the engine of any country's economic development. Yet they have traditionally allocated more resources to expenditure rather than investment in social services. "They should operationalise capital budgets and social ministries," Chinyama says, "as these play a crucial role in developing the economy."

Military spending in sub-Saha-

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**DETERMINED:** The absence of desks and other physical facilities has not stopped these young children in schools in Malindi, Kenya from pursuing education.

FOCUS ON THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION MINISTERS' MEETING – EDINBURGH

# Free education: who calls the shots?

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But do the international bodies have their own agenda in supporting African countries to achieve free education? This question is hardly frivolous: when the Kenya government increased teachers' salaries to head off a long-standing pay award dispute dating back to 1997, the local World Bank country director made his dissatisfaction known.

He argued that Kenya's wage bill was too high and that 11 percent of its gross domestic product goes to salaries for public servants, including teachers.

He pointed to the fact that 28 percent of the GDP is spent on recurrent expenditure and compared this with Tanzania, which spends 4.1 percent of its GDP, Uganda with 5.7 percent and Zambia with 7.8 percent.

Free education is a component of recurrent

expenditure, which is also used to service schools and roads.

What the World Bank was doing, in effect, was to question the government's policies. As far as it was concerned, Kenya was simply not focusing on priority areas. The core focus should be on agriculture, it argues. What this means is that the bank wants to direct the policies of this country.

This is not unexpected: any kind of support comes with strings attached. For example, Japan recently granted Kenya US\$1 billion for educational, food, health and water assis-

tance. The grant is part of an economic package in support of the New Economic Plan for Africa's Development (Nepad). But why should education be tied to Nepad? Is this not a way of some of these global institutions sneaking in their agenda?

If universal primary education is to be achieved by the year 2015, African governments will need genuine support.

Africa needs to increase children's access to education; increase basic/compulsory free education levels, improve the quality of the curriculum and focus teacher training

around more efficient/effective methods of teaching. Adequate pay for teachers is central to all this. We cannot trust hungry and discontented teachers with the lives of young African children — not if we want the children to achieve their full potential.

These international institutions should also respect the needs of African people and not dictate priorities to their governments. African governments must remain firm on the issue of free primary education and refuse to succumb to pressure from international donors who might not understand or appreciate the peculiar needs of their people. The millions of Kenyan children who bombarded schools with requests for admission in January this year were clear about their priority — education, education and more education!

**"Africa needs to increase children's access to education; increase basic/compulsory free education levels, improve the quality of the curriculum and focus teacher training around more efficient/effective methods of teaching. Adequate pay for teachers is central to all this"**

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**BUT REFLECTS THE VIEWS OF AFRICAWOMAN**

## Africa should invest in education, not war

ran Africa dropped from US\$9.3 billion in the early 1990s to \$7.1 billion in 1996. But it rose sharply again in 1999 and 2002 to an average of \$9.8

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billion. This does not, however, capture overall military spending in the region since the data reflects only official figures. Angola spent 3.1 percent of its gross domestic product on the military in 2001 while Sierra Leone spent 3.6 percent on the military and one percent on education. Stocking up on the machinery for war appears to be a major pre-occupation for African governments.

The continent suffered 11 major conflicts in 1998, putting it ahead of all the other continents for the first time since 1989. In the 1990s decade, 32 African countries experienced armed conflict, and many of the countries affected face continuing civil war or the looming threat of renewed fighting.

Though there are no precise figures, some experts estimate that more than one-third of the continent's resources are spent on buying arms. It is a situation that many find untenable. "Children in Africa need education and health care — not tanks, jets and guns," former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias said.

Arias told delegates during a three-day meeting on the "Leadership challenges of militarisation in Africa" held in July in Arusha, Tanzania, that it would be necessary to educate people on demilitarisation and the need to channel resources to development activities. Says Arias: "What we say is that we don't hate armies. But we need the resources to be used in other development activities."

During the Cold War, Africa was one of the most militarised zones in the world. At the beginning of the 1990s, a semblance of peace and stability returned to countries that began the process of opening up the political space to more players. But coups and conflicts in the middle and late 1990s have undermined the gains.

A peculiar feature of militarisation in Africa is that the poorest countries — including Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Somalia — are spending the most on arms and the military.

With continued political instability in Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Algeria, Eritrea and the Democratic Republic of Congo, military spending is likely to grow rather than decrease.

This will clearly work against the drive to achieve education for all by 2015. The literacy rate in Sierra Leone stands at 36.3 percent, that of females accounts for 22.6 percent. Mozambique's literacy rate is 42.3 percent, well below the continental average of 58.5 percent. Zambia's is on the high side at 78.9 percent and Zimbabwe's is above 80 percent.

### Piling on the agony

Poverty has made a bad situation worse, especially when households reeling under its effects have to pay school fees.

In southern African countries, such as Zimbabwe, drought threatens to pile on the agony as most resources are channelled into importing food.

Some countries are, however, cutting back on military budgets: South Africa has reduced its military budget by at least 51 percent since 1989. Mozambique has made

efforts to halve its troops in keeping with the 1992 peace agreement that ended the conflict between the ruling Frelimo government and rebels of the National Resistance Movement.

According to Liberian Education Minister Evelyne Kandaka, the ongoing war has deprived the population of education. Only 35 percent of Liberians are literate. The effects of continued warfare will be felt long after the crisis is over for the simple reason that Liberians can only contribute to the growth and development of their nation if they are literate.

If governments channelled more resources to the education sector, the burden on parents would be greatly reduced. Yet cost sharing has become the by-word in many African countries.

Says Molly Khumalo, a Zimbabwean mother of four: "We want the best for our children. We want them to go to schools of our choice, we want them to have all the requirements, such as textbooks and other equipment. But we just can't afford it. Sending a child to school has become the preserve of the rich."

Although free education has led to increased enrolment in many African countries, it is not without its difficulties, however. Zimbabwe allocated \$109 billion to the ministry of education last year and \$76 billion to the defence ministry (local rates). But there are those who argue that this is not good enough for the country to achieve its education goals. With the national budget just around the corner, many Zimbabweans are calling for an increase in allocations to social services.

## FOCUS ON THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION MINISTERS' MEETING – EDINBURGH

## TANZANIA

# All these children want is a decent education

By Sakina Zainul Dattoo

Tanzania may have benefited from debt cancellation under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries programme, but the funds meant to go to the education sector have yet to reach the majority.

It is yet another complaint in a litany of woes facing education in this country. Though the universal primary education scheme assures every child of at least basic education, there are complaints that classes are too crowded for meaningful learning to take place. Quality education is now the domain of private schools, which charge fees that only a privileged few can afford.

But the harshest criticism is reserved for the cost-sharing scheme at the secondary school level. Pushed to the limits in the 1980s, the government introduced the scheme in which it shared the burden of education with parents. It was soon abandoned as impractical at the primary level but continues in secondary schools.

The result was that only about 15 percent of children finishing primary school were able to proceed to the secondary level. Most parents are simply too poor to afford their part of the costs, including fees, books, uniform and the many other educational requirements that government schools do not provide.

Mariam Bilal, a standard seven pupil at the private Bilal Comprehensive School, says: "Cost sharing is not good enough. Most parents can't cope with even that. The government itself does not appear able to do its part. I think non-governmental organisations and other institutions can fill the gaps."

Her father, a small-time businessman, has already told her he is not sure he will be able to afford her secondary education. "Only education will change the future of Tanzanians, who are so poor," says the girl who comes first in her class and dreams of becoming a doctor.

Parents must pay a minimum of \$60

per year as public secondary school fees while uniform, books and other necessities can cost about \$80 on the lower side. With most families here earning \$1 per person per day, such costs are outright prohibitive. Most parents have more than one child, making secondary education a luxury in most families.

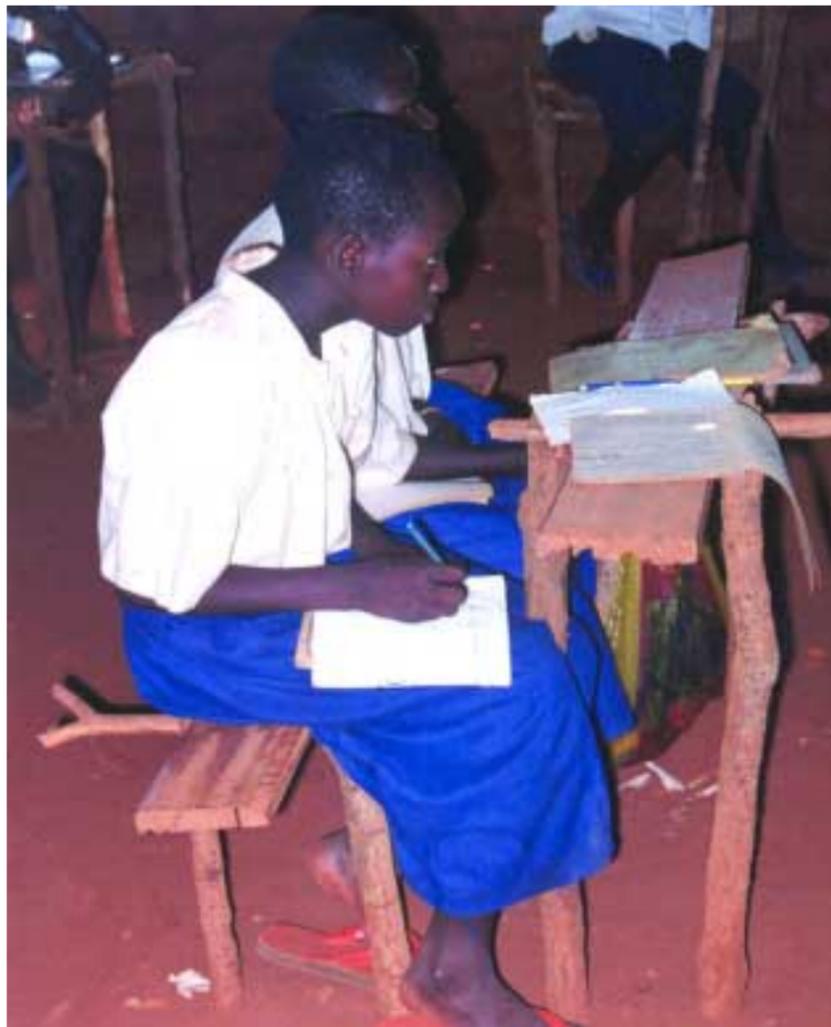
Hidaya Mohamed, who is in standard six, would like to go on to Benjamin Mka-pa Secondary School, a government school she has heard praised a great deal. But there is no history of secondary education in her family. She has an older brother who does not go to school and a younger sister in a government primary school. Her mother, who is a single parent, earns a living selling maandazi (traditional buns).

"I don't think I can go there," says Mohamed. "My mother can't pay her contribution. I don't know who can help me... our government is good, but it is not for all. It helps only those who can be seen but not all of us."

But Education Minister Joseph Mungai denies that students are unable to go to secondary school for lack of fees. "No child has ever been turned away from school because of inability to pay fees," he told *Africawoman*.

A survey at Bilal Comprehensive School in Temeke, Dar es Salaam, shows that most of the students finishing standard seven – which marks the end of primary education – get good grades. Many are able to secure places in government and private schools but cannot continue because they simply cannot afford the fees.

Says school administrator Siddika Karim: "It is a sad reality. While in most places parents and teachers worry about their children's performance in exams, the situation here is different. Passing is not the issue at all. It breaks our hearts when the children cannot go far because



**DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES:** African children consider education the passport to a bright future.

their parents are too poor to send them to secondary school."

The future is very much on the minds of these children, who see education as the passport to a brighter future. "I want to study further so I can get a good job, but I don't know if I can because I don't have parents and I can't keep on depending on my sister," says 15-year-old Kurwa Muharami. Her sister runs a small business and also supports a brother in standard four.

Hadija Amiri, 15, wants to be a nurse when she grows up – like the aunt who is now paying her fees – but is sceptical about the likelihood of getting government support for her secondary education. "To me, the government is doing nothing as lots of kids go without education," she says.

Children in difficult circumstances depend on finding people with good hearts to sponsor their secondary education. Parents here spend sleepless nights worrying about the future of their children. For days on end, they search for people of goodwill who will spare some cash for their children's fees. "It is not just about money," says mother-of-three Twaiba Kassim. "It is also about policy. The government can do better."

Having lost her husband to cancer two years ago and educated only up to standard seven, Kassim could only find a job as a househelp. She earns about \$40 a month. "It's a tough life, but I am sacrificing everything for my children's education, so that they and their children can have better lives."

Her oldest daughter has been lucky enough to find a sponsor willing to pay

for a year at a private secondary school. Kassim herself pays minimal fees at a charitable private primary school for the other two. She is disillusioned with both cost sharing and government schools. "Classes are crowded and the teachers can't cope. Private schools are also better because they teach in English."

She is critical of a recent decision by Parliament to retain Kiswahili as the medium of instruction in government schools. "Those very MPs send their children to English schools. They are fooling us. You can't go far without English. Even Mwalimu Nyerere himself had to know English to fight for our independence," she adds.

In the cost sharing scheme of things, the government is responsible for teachers' salaries, the upkeep of schools and basic facilities. But most government schools do not have laboratories, libraries and books and parents are often asked to bear the extra costs of providing them. Consequently, most government schools are in pathetic condition – with no electricity.

But Tanzania's children are not overly worried about that. All they want is an education. "Cost sharing helps a little, but the government should do for secondary education what they have for primary – make it free and compulsory for every child to attend secondary school – since you need a minimum of form four education to become financially independent," says Hood Salum. He is 15.

Minister Mungai has a different solution. He wants parents to build more day secondary schools so more children can further their education. It is a comment that annoys Margaret Chiyawa. Her mother is already stretched to capacity paying \$400 per year for her primary education.

**"It's a tough life, but I am sacrificing everything for my children's education, so that they and their children can have better lives"**

## FOCUS ON THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION MINISTERS' MEETING – EDINBURGH

## EDITORIAL

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Africawoman is produced by 80 women journalists from Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia and Nigeria who meet in a virtual newsroom once a month. The information produced is then linked to community radios throughout Africa to reach grassroot women.

## Remember the children of Africa

Life is full of contradictions: On the one hand, the developed world spends almost \$1 trillion on defence every year and another \$350 billion on agricultural subsidies. Most of their children have free education. They can easily access loans to fund their university studies. On the other hand, the combined force of developing nations cannot raise \$10 million for education.

It is against this backdrop that the Commonwealth education ministers will be meeting in Edinburgh to discuss access, inclusion and achievement. At this point, it would be appropriate to remind ourselves of what Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon has to say on the subject: "All children and young people, whatever their background, should be able to participate fully in education. We must ensure all young people have access to education because it is one of the basic routes out of poverty and a fundamental right to all in a just society."

The ministers from the 54 countries of the Commonwealth will not only be going into a conference overshadowed by the financial problems of the developing nations. They will no doubt bear in mind the issues raised in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000. Many countries have experienced austere economic adjustment programmes and an increased debt burden. There are questions to do with poor governance and inadequate resources used poorly. There are considerations such as disasters, including drought and floods. HIV/Aids continues to exact a terrible toll in Africa and armed conflict has had devastating effects on education.

To this list, we want to add gender-specific issues such as early marriage, teenage pregnancy and cultures and traditions that stand in the way of African girls seeking to go to school. African girls are entering puberty without any form of support in schools and at home to enable them deal with the challenges of adolescence: for reasons as simple as lack of toilets and guidance and counselling, girls are dropping out of school. They often fall prey to their teachers, the very same people charged with protecting them, yet many countries do not appear to have the will to crack down on sexual abuse in schools.

Even where there are policies and laws on sex with minors, bureaucrats appear to pay little heed to the rights of girls. If any work is done at all, it is more likely than not to have been spearheaded by non-governmental organisations. On the plus side, we bring to you a number of stories charting the breakthroughs that girls are making all over Africa. They are inspiring stories of girls rising above stereotypes to do with science and mathematics, young women beginning their journey into leadership by contesting posts in student organisations at university and even girls getting out of child labour and returning to school.

One of the key learning points in the story of free education on the continent is that it is not enough for politicians to throw open the doors to schools. Because of poor planning, free education poses a multitude of problems well beyond the scope of teachers to deal with. Read all about the experiences of teachers overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of students desperate to get an education. It is a Catch-22 situation, as the quality of education drops drastically with the onslaught on the few resources available.

The Global Campaign for Education (GCE), a coalition of non-governmental organisations and trade unions with members in more than 100 countries, is urging rich countries to fulfill their promise to increase their current allocations for basic education by US\$5.6 billion annually - bringing the total to US\$7 billion. The GCE is also calling on developing country governments to increase their own spending on basic education to at least 3% of GDP.

It would be a great waste of resources if the Commonwealth ministers do not come up with specific and time-bound programmes to support holistic education systems in Africa. They need to think beyond free primary education and plan for the next stage - secondary school and vocational training. As the free education experience has proved, it is not just about quantity - it is also about quality. Taking short cuts in this critical area will only compromise the future of our children.

## POINT OF VIEW

## Girls can't afford to wait as ministers drag their feet

By Susan Naa Sekyere, Ghana

There are no laws barring Ghanaian girls from enrolling in school and staying there. But there are many acts of commission and omission that keep them out of school. Some of these acts are criminal, but the culprits get away with it. Not a day passes without a story in the media of teachers defiling their pupils. Some fall pregnant and have to leave; others drop out because they cannot cope with the abuse.

All this is happening in modern Ghana, which boasts a fully-fledged ministry of basic, secondary and girl child education headed by a woman. There is no denying that the government has responded positively to the call to give women and girls equal opportunities in every aspect of life. But should this gender sensitive policy not have an impact on issues such as male teachers defiling their female charges?

The government should know that its gender sensitivity will not be judged by the number of institutions and projects oriented towards girls and women that have been started since it took office.

The test is in how successful these initiatives have been in making the world a better place for women. This should extend to an assessment of how many obnoxious practices and traditions that affect women that the government has managed to bring to an end.

Minister Christine Churcher says most of these discriminatory practices are deeply rooted in society. No amount of education can clear them if people are not ready to abandon them. Our society should also accept that it will remain backward until the gap between boys and girls in school is bridged. In Ghana, the number of girls in primary school comprises 48 percent of the enrolment; this drops to 45 percent in junior secondary school and 42 percent in senior secondary.

Aba Mansah Forson, the director of the girls' education unit of the ministry of education, youth and sports, says defilement of girls by their teachers happens more in rural areas than in towns. She reckons that rural girls are less assertive and confident than their urban counterparts. Parents, too, encourage their children to "help" their teachers, male or female, leading to some teachers taking advantage of the situation to defile girls. Forson declines to give statistics on the issue but is quick to add that whatever statistics are available do not reflect the true situation: not all the cases are reported to her unit.

The education sector has no specific policy guidelines on defilement despite the fact that this problem dates back to the days when Ghana was known as the Gold Coast. Is it that the education gurus do not consider this a problem, therefore we should all shut up and expect it to go away on its own? There is some consolation from Forson, who says: "The act constitutes gross indiscipline and offenders face outright dismissal from the Ghana Education Service."

Ebenezer Buabeng of Darkuman has learnt this lesson well. On April 24, 2002, he was jailed for seven years for defiling a 13-year-old girl. The teacher used the age-old trick of giving the unsuspecting girl a book to take to his room. He then followed her and attacked her. In another incident, school proprietor Kwaku Apanfo appeared in court on charges of defiling a five-year-old. His wife was pregnant at the time, almost full term, but was that any reason to assault a child?

The reports abound, but whether the education officials hand over the perpetrators to police for prosecution is another matter altogether. Dismissing deviants is not good enough. What is required is a well-documented policy that sets out how such

matters should be dealt with once and for all. The sooner, the better - for both girls and Ghana's image.

Even though Unicef has a five-year programme aimed at strengthening the capacity of the government and civil society to ensure all children achieve the right to basic education, Ghana can hardly be said to have reciprocated. The country has dedicated only 2.5 percent of its gross domestic income to education; neighbouring Togo gives seven percent.

Says Roseline Obeng-Ofori, the gender and impact assessment coordinator at ActionAid-Ghana: "Government has to do more to ensure girls go to school and get the protection they need to stay and complete their education."

According to Obeng-Ofori, non-governmental organisations are doing more in this area. This is not good enough, she argues, since it is government that must blaze the trail for organisations and the people.

The time for rhetoric is up. Governments must demonstrate more commitment to girls' education. International conferences, such as the Commonwealth Education Ministers' meeting, are fine. But the resolutions they adopt must be implemented to justify the huge amounts of money spent on them. If not, they will be reduced to yet more "talk shops". Girls cannot afford to wait as their leaders drag their feet.

**"Government has to do more to ensure girls go to school and get the protection they need to stay and complete their education"**



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## FOCUS ON THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION MINISTERS' MEETING – EDINBURGH

## TANZANIA

# Throwing girls out is not solution

By Jamillah Mwanjisi

Like any other 16-year-old, Alice Imani had big dreams. She wanted to be a doctor. She just loved the status and influence that doctors have in Africa. Status is something she can no longer hope for. She was expelled from school last year after committing the "sin" of falling pregnant and has become yet another drop out statistic.

"What can I do with standard six education?" she asks rhetorically. "I will just have to accept this life; I hope I can get some skills so I can take care of my child and myself."

The ministry of education and culture in this country has only one "remedy" for schoolgirls who get pregnant: throw them out. Last revisited in 1989, the regulations define pregnancy and sex as bad behaviour. Only students at university may continue their education when they fall pregnant.

"According to the ministry, girls are not supposed to have sex while they are still in school," says Farida Mgunda, coordinator of a youth centre under the Family Planning Association of Tanzania (Umati). "Pregnancy means you had sex and you were, therefore, misbe-

having. Some argue that once you get pregnant you are an adult and you don't deserve to be in school."

Mgunda adds: "How can you consider a 13-year-old an adult? She is still a child and needs to be given a chance to grow up and learn from her mistakes."

Umati established centre in 1986 to give a second chance to girls who drop out of primary school. They are taught family planning methods and life skills. Those who make up for the years lost may move on to private secondary schools or join vocational training institutes. They cannot be accepted in government schools.

Most of the girls at the centre are poor and their parents cannot afford the fees for private schools. Fees in private schools range from \$500 to \$1,000 a year.

Falling pregnant in school has other consequences: unmarried mothers are a source of embarrassment for their families. Some girls are thrown out of home and are rejected by society. They lose any prospects of getting married as they are considered immoral.

Marjorie Mbilinyi of Haki Elimu (Right to Education), a non-governmental organisation that advocates



IN SEARCH OF QUALITY: Marjorie Mbilinyi, left, argues that there should be no excuse to deny girls their rights.

quality and equal education in Tanzania, argues that expelling pregnant girls from school runs counter to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which makes education a basic right. "The sad thing is that it's not even a law, just a regulation," says Mbilinyi. "There is no excuse to leave it there and deprive

**"How can you consider a 13-year-old an adult? She is still a child and needs to be given a chance to grow up and learn from her mistakes."**

girls of their basic right."

Besides, most teenaged girls have little or no knowledge of safe sex – even how their bodies function – because sexuality is a taboo subject in many African communi-

ties. Adolescents get their information from the media or their peers, which in most cases is wrong or incomplete.

A survey of adolescent mothers in Dar es Salaam and Morogoro reveals that many of them have little knowledge of sexual and reproductive health issues. Most of those interviewed were not able to point out the exact period in a woman's monthly cycle when pregnancy occurs.

The study, titled *Chelewa Chelewa* (Delay Delay), established that when some girls miss their periods they wrongly associate it with changes in the weather or even the effect of medication.

Family Life Education was recently introduced in the curriculum of secondary schools and teacher training colleges but the teachers responsible for these subjects lack teaching aids and the skills to discuss sexuality in class.

As a result, they rush through or skip the topics that they feel uncomfortable with.

In collaboration with Temeke Municipal Council, Dar es Salaam, Umati has trained 33 teachers on sexuality education and how to talk about the subject to young people. The project has reached just one-third of the schools in the district.

Civil society groups in Tanzania have long advocated the cancellation of the pregnancy regulation, but the ministry of education and culture remains unmoved. Last July, some members of parliament raised the question with the then minister Juma Kapuya, who said the ministry was waiting for a consensus from the people on the matter. Some parents were against the idea of giving young mothers another chance to complete their education, he said. Besides, he added, there were not many girls dropping out of school due to pregnancy.

## ZAMBIA

# Coming to the rescue of abducted girls

By Pamela Chama

**CHARITY** Moyo drags her feet as she makes her way to the headmaster's office at Nchute Basic School in the heart of Chongwe district, east of Lusaka. The grade seven pupil is seven months' pregnant. Though her school mates stare and giggle each time she arrives in her maternity uniform, she has never become used to it and it still hurts.

She tells her story, staring at her feet: "I was drawing water at the river after leaving school when a man who had told me on two occasions that he liked me came by and grabbed me with the help of another man. They took me to his home. I was shocked by what happened next. I was unprepared for what I underwent. If that is what marriage is about, I never want to go there.

All I wanted was to return home and go back to school."

Abduction of girls is common in this community and when she did not return home, her father immediately set in motion efforts to find the person responsible and reported the matter to the local office of the Programme for the Advancement of Girl Child Education (Page). He knew the importance of educating girls, having attended a talk arranged by the organisation. "At that meeting, we were told that a girl who has been forced into marriage could be rescued and allowed to continue with her schooling, regardless of her condition," says Elliot Moyo. "I was determined to see my daughter complete school."

A week after Charity's abduction, Page Coordinator Miriam

Nyirongo completed the arrangements and got the 14-year-old out of the man's home. She had already conceived, but that was not a problem because the government had introduced an inclusion policy seeking to guarantee all children an education.

"Page promotes the education of girls regardless of their circumstances, and that is what I am doing here in Chongwe," says Nyirongo. She has her work cut out for her. Girls as young as 12 have been literally dragged into marriage here, bringing to an abrupt end their education. Page operates in 53 basic schools and four high schools.

"We have brought back 77 girls who were taken away from school this year for various reasons, including early marriage, sexual abuse and defilement," says Dis-

trict Education Board Secretary Edson Simwanza.

Because communities are involved in Page, parents have taken to coming into the local offices offering to withdraw their children from early marriages. Some simply want more information on how the programme can help advance the interests of girls.

Simwanza proudly says: "We rescued a girl of 13 a few days before her forced marriage. She has been in boarding school for three days now. Neither her parents nor the supposed husband know where she is and we are paying for everything"

Chongwe is one of 72 districts running the Page campaign. The programme aims to reduce absenteeism by doing follow-ups in the homes of children who stop coming

to school. According to government data, pupils in rural areas are more likely to miss school than those in urban centres – at 89 to 80 percent.

Education Minister Andrew Mulenga says: "In the past, girls were thrown out of school upon getting pregnant because they were assumed to have graduated into the club of mothers, which was intellectual wastage."

It is not always a bed of roses though, says Nyirongo: "I lost a case in one of the remotest areas where a girl aged less than 12 was being married off. The place was too far for me to reach with my motor bike. Sometimes, parents are difficult and argue that the child is not mine. I tell them that though they brought the child into the world, she now belongs to the nation."

## FOCUS ON THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION MINISTERS' MEETING – EDINBURGH

KENYA

# Free education comes at a high price

By Kwamboka Oyaro

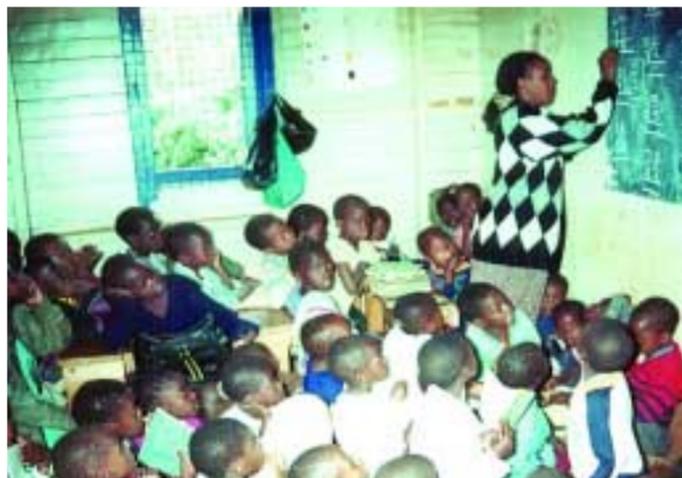
**THREE** pairs of hands fight for space on a small table ordinarily meant for two pupils. On the narrow passageways between the rows of desks, more small hands scribble on books placed on the children's laps. This standard one classroom is filled with enthusiastic faces – so many, in fact, that there is standing room only for the teacher.

This is St Joseph's Primary School, Nyamira, about 350 kilometres west of Nairobi. Many of the children here are barefoot; others are not in the blue and white uniform. For most, it is their first time in a classroom – thanks to the free primary education introduced early this year.

Even the tattered exercise books and the fact that they have to share text books will not dampen the spirits of the children in this room. For the first time in their lives, someone has thrown them a lifeline to a brighter future.

It is hope that defies reality: with the enrolment in primary schools shooting to 7.5 million from last year's 2.5 million, teachers can hardly cope with the numbers. The strain on teachers has greatly compromised the standards of education. After freezing the employment of teachers since 1998, the ministry of education has advertised jobs – but they are in essence only for the replacement of those who have retired, quit or died.

If effective learning is to take place, the teacher-pupil ratio should be one to 30 at the most. But the learning windfall in Kenya now means that some teachers have to handle up to 70 pupils. Says Isabel Ogeto: "Teaching has never been so tiring. I stand here in front of the



**COMMITTED:** Even the fact that they have to share tattered text-books will not dampen the spirits of the children in this room.

class, looking at tens of pairs of hopeful eyes. Although they are in standard one, they are at different levels of understanding. Some do not know how to hold a pencil, yet I can't help them."

Before free primary education, it was easier to cater for the needs of pupils with special needs. There was private tuition after school for those lagging behind. Parents conditioned to believe that education was the passport to a bright future dug ever deeper into their pockets – even when their children could actually pass exams under their own steam.

Tuition is now illegal in public schools. Slow learners must struggle to catch up with their classmates and many teachers complain of fatigue. Like other workers, teachers thrive on feedback, preferably evidence that the children are grasping the concepts they are being taught. They are motivated by adequate pay. But the classroom boom has not translated into better pay for the teachers, who went on strike in 1997 to demand the implemen-

tation of a salary award that gave them a rise of 200 to 400 percent. The new government has come to an agreement with the Kenya National Union of Teachers which spreads the award over a decade. It is small consolation for teachers bombarded with strident demands for quality education.

Indeed, teachers in a school in Nyamira have devised a way to avoid the stress of teaching classes filled to the brim. They hire untrained teachers and quacks to stand in for them as they spend time on farming or managing their businesses. Others simply do not turn up or make alternative arrangements.

Some teachers say forging ahead without assessing their pupils defeats the purpose of education and that it is impossible to mark 60 to 70 exercise books three or four times a day. Head teachers have had their own battles with ministry headquarters over extra levies. The government has banned such levies, which were part of the parents' role in cost sharing but gained a

bad name due to the excesses of some schools, and some headmasters have been suspended for continuing to demand them. With suspicion running high, it is difficult for the head teachers to concentrate on academic excellence and simultaneously trying to save their jobs.

The head teachers argue that projects initiated by parents have stalled because the government has not set aside money to complete them. In some cases, parents are willing to do so but find their hands tied by the new regulations. Support staff were sent home with the advent of free education and, in many schools, pupils are now responsible for the general cleanliness of schools – and this takes substantial time off learning. Tea for teachers and other fringe benefits have been withdrawn since January.

The money provided by the ministry is specifically meant for stationery, with each pupil assigned Sh1,020 (about \$14) a year. This is neither sufficient for mid-term tests used to assess children's development nor to sustain prize-giving ceremonies meant to motivate children.

To the government, however, free education is a major breakthrough in itself. Charity Ngilu, the most senior woman in the coalition government and also the minister for health, says: "It is so amazing seeing children going to school for the first time in their lives. That was my dream and it is now a reality!"

The euphoria holds for now, fuelled by children ecstatic at the idea of sitting in classrooms rather than being engaged in various forms of child labour for the simple reason that their parents cannot afford to fund their education.

## POINT OF VIEW

## Education: A means to an end

By Margaret Nankinga, Uganda

**T**he good news is that over 7.5 million Ugandan children are in primary school today, thanks to free universal primary education. The bad news is that the dropout rate is so high that alarmed educationists are returning to the drawing board to find out precisely what is driving the children out of school.

According to ministry of education records, only 33 percent of the 2.1 million pupils who enrolled in primary one in 1997 reached primary six in 2002. Only 22 percent made it to primary seven this year.

They start dropping out as early as primary two. Of the two million or so who enrolled in 1998, 847,257 did not return the following year; a good number drop out just before their primary leaving examinations.

With these levels of wastage, it would be wiser for the government to invest more in vocational training than secondary education. One of the Commonwealth education values is developing life skills.

### New purpose

The Ugandan government ought to focus on training teachers for vocational studies. This will give new purpose to primary education.

The fourteenth conference of Commonwealth education ministers in Canada in 2000 emphasised the need for re-orienting education along the following lines: education should produce thinkers rather than mere implementers and should deal with all levels and different approaches.

The ministers also stressed the need to intensify efforts to promote gender equity in access to education.

If this is to be achieved in Uganda, the focus should be on solving education's worst enemy – poverty. This can only be achieved by concentrating efforts in primary education towards life skills and vocations. Education is a means to an end, not an end in itself, and should be geared towards addressing people's basic needs.

Only recently, President Yoweri Museveni warned schools against charging compulsory lunch fees as this would discourage poor parents from sending children to school.

He said: "Children should not be sent away because they do not have today's lunch. They should be left to continue with their education because education will give them lunch forever."

That, of course, does not solve the problem. What it does is leave school authorities between a rock and a hard place: they have a choice between having hungry pupils trying to pay attention and having no pupils at all.



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## FOCUS ON THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION MINISTERS' MEETING – EDINBURGH

## GHANA

# Given half a chance, girls will conquer science

By Rebecca Kwei

**SOPHIA** Awortwi, Ghana's director of science education, is in the mood for celebration – for good reason. "We have broken the myth surrounding the study of science-related subjects," she says. "Judging by the number of girls receiving prizes in science subjects, I can say that not only are more girls studying science but they are also excelling in it."

The girls have the Science, Technology and Mathematics Education (STME) clinic to thank for their success. Started in 1987, STME came out of a regional workshop organised by the Commonwealth Secretariat in Accra. It had the theme "Gender stereotyping in science, technology and mathematics education".

For the first 10 years, the clinic brought together up to 200 girls for a two-week period during the long

vacation. Here they met female role models and specialists in scientific disciplines; they also had lessons in science, maths and technology – the idea being to demystify science and mathematics and expose the girls to career opportunities in these areas.

The programme spread to the regional level after 1997 and also included junior secondary schools. It has since been introduced at the district level. As at 2002, more than 6,000 girls had benefited from the scheme. And the results prove the effort was worth it.

When the programme started, girls represented only 11 percent of students taking science at the GCE level. Five years later, the number had risen to 24 percent. Says Awortwi: "The number of girls taking science in higher learning institutions continues to rise. They are performing as well as some boys. In a number of cases, some



**NO PROBLEM:** Third form students in the chemistry laboratory at a Harare school.

girls in senior secondary school perform better than boys."

The director cites examples to back her case: In 1997, female students grabbed 15 of the 21 prizes at the University of Ghana Medical School thanks to the STME clinics. Indeed, Joanna Elsie Mensah, a participant in the programme, collected 10 of the 15 prizes. She credits the scheme with helping her achieve her career goals. For the first time ever, a student at the University of Cape Coast scored a first

class grade in mathematics. She too is a product of the clinic.

Catherine De Graft Jackson, 15, participated in this year's programme: "I have really benefited from the clinic and I hope other people will have the chance to take part in it. I have made friends, learnt a lot and had the opportunity to do hands-on practicals. The project we worked on was most interesting – participants were able to produce charcoal out of cassava and sweets from aloe vera."

But not everyone is pleased with this progress. The problem: boys are being discriminated against, critics say. The response has been swift. For the first time ever, boys have been included this year.

Says Awortwi: "From the many discussions we have had, we gathered that boys feel excluded from this important project. There is a growing concern, not only in Ghana but also other developing countries, about the apparent exclusion of boys from this motivational programme. We thought it wise to include them, although the number of girls still outweighs boys."

There are fears, however, that giving in to such pressure will be counter-productive in the long run. The clinic was set up to deal with the gender imbalance in the sciences, and this has yet to be achieved.

Should all programmes targeting gender equality be stopped because a few women have made progress and been appointed to key positions? The girls who have participated in the clinics are worthy ambassadors, at any rate. They are to be found at the top of honours lists in their schools and colleges.

It is estimated that about 80 percent of scientific research is concentrated in a few industrialised countries. Africa has less than one percent of the world's scientists. Not surprisingly, development is a slow business on the continent. The answer lies, perhaps, in bringing more women on board the science and technology train. As the Ghanaian experience proves, the girls of Africa are willing and able to take up the challenge – if given even just half the chance. This is not a threat to men. It is reality.

## Tell our daughters about sex and periods

By Charity Binka

**GROWING** up and facing the challenges of adolescence is a subject that is unlikely to feature on the agenda at the Commonwealth Education Ministers' meeting in Edinburgh.

Yet natural developments such as puberty and the onset of menstruation are still compromising the level of girls' education in many parts of Africa. Consider these findings from a 2000 study conducted by the Forum for African Women Educationalists in the Eastern, Volta, Brong Ahafo and Northern regions of Ghana: Even though adolescent pregnancy is a major factor in school drop out, not much has been done to counsel girls on the process of sexual maturation and menstruation. Some girls are thrown into shock the first time they menstruate. Some fall pregnant and do not even know it.

A total of 1,544 teenaged girls in junior and secondary schools were interviewed for the "Exploratory research on sexual maturation and

menstrual hygiene practices among adolescent school girls in Ghana".

Not surprisingly, the wastage of girls in the school system due to pregnancy is high. About 28 percent of girls getting pregnant were aged 15 and below; some fell pregnant at nine – truly a case of children having children.

Girls in co-educational institutions suffer significantly more: They must contend with lecherous teachers and adventurous boys who want to experiment and satisfy their sexual curiosity. Like the girls, the boys are often ignorant about what is happening to their bodies. Girls in mixed schools have a hard time of it should they have "accidents" during menstruation. They are teased mercilessly and even called "dirty".

Indeed, many of the girls in the Fawe study described their first experience with menstruation as confusing, shameful, terrorising or stressful. In Ghana, menstruation is not taken seriously. It is certainly not discussed in schools. But

## GHANA

even though the subject is not mentioned at all in primary school, statistics indicate that girls are starting their periods as early as nine.

In many African communities, menstruation is seen as "dirty". Though the onset of menarche is celebrated in some Ghanaian communities, the general trend is to stigmatise the event. Menstruation is not mentioned by name in many communities. It is referred to in some languages as "she has gone outside the house", "she has broken her hands" and "she has touched the ground with her hands".

The demonising of menstruation is perpetuated by some religious sects, which consider a woman in her menses as not clean enough to receive communion. In fact, they may not even be allowed into church. The cycle is completed by traditionalists who might not even allow a woman to cook for her husband when she is on her periods.

That girls should continue to be stigmatised and discriminated

against simply because their bodies are responding to the natural order of things is unacceptable in the 21st Century. Forget the notion that girls in primary school are too young to know about menstruation. It is the duty of district assemblies, the Ghana Education Service and other stakeholders to provide facilities such as toilets, water and sanitary towels to make schools girl-friendly, argues Adow.

Menstruation is a natural part of every woman's adult life and it need not be turned into a crisis or something to be ashamed of. African governments did, after all, commit themselves to the 2000 World Education Forum Declaration in Dakar that set new goals to ensure education for all.

They appended their signatures to the Declaration, in which they agreed to:

- Expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.
- Ensure that by 2015, all children – particularly girls, children in dif-

ficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities – have access to and can complete quality primary education that is free and compulsory.

• Improve adult literacy rates by 50 percent by the year 2015, especially for women, and ensure that all adults have equitable access to basic and continuing education.

• Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and gender inequalities in all aspects of education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring that girls will have full and equal access to and achievement of basic education of good quality.

Toilets, water and a girl-friendly environment in schools are surely not too much to ask when the payoff is a better-adjusted society. And so we ask the honourable ministers in Edinburgh to put the education of girls on top of their agenda.

And, please, let's not forget menstruation. It is nothing to be embarrassed about. The shame is in letting it ruin the lives of millions of schoolgirls in Africa.

## FOCUS ON THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION MINISTERS' MEETING – EDINBURGH

## NIGERIA

# Grooming tomorrow's leaders

By Yetunde Oladeinde

**AFTER** years of social conditioning that they must be seen as delicate and soft-spoken, Nigeria's female students are all set to upset the apple cart as they move into leadership positions on campus.

Counselling programmes at local universities have traditionally focused on stimulating the interest of female students in subjects once considered a male domain but have rarely focused on inspiring them to take up leadership roles. But all that is changing.

"I contested and became the first female vice-president of Osun State Polytechnic, Iree, in order to break the male monopoly of the student union government," says Omowumi Abdulazeez. She is joined in these ranks by 24-year-old Remilekun Odunuga, who is the vice-president of the Lagos State University Students Union.

Even where they do not hold substantive posts, female students are increasingly influential in campus politics. To survive the tough political terrain of student politics, they have had to adopt a new lifestyle. Fashion shows are out; late night political meetings in college buildings are in.

Interestingly enough, as many

young men – especially in the south-east – are abandoning higher education to go into trading, young women capitalise on the myriad programmes on public speaking and other leadership skills to chip away at the glass ceiling and walls.

Says Oladunni Irinoye, a lecturer at Obafemi Awolowo University at Ile Ife in south-west Nigeria: "It is a positive development for female leadership in future. I am excited because things are changing gradually. I have also discovered that these girls now read books about great philosophers; they collect historical speeches and show an interest in politics. Even though this is informal, it has a lot of impact on their overall performance."

Mills and Boon and Barbara Cartland have given way to Karl Marx, Abraham Lincoln and Margaret Thatcher as favourite reading materials. "They are also more likely to watch films about power and politics rather than romance and comedy," adds Irinoye.

Here are thumbnail portraits of some of Nigeria's queens of student politics:

Veronica Miebai, a final year law student at Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, joined student politics in 1999 as she studied for a diploma in

Port Harcourt. It was an experience full of intrigue and it prepared her for university life, where she was greatly influenced by Ken Henshaw, a former president of the National Association of Nigerian Students. "I earned the nickname Aluta Mama because of the positive role I played then. It gave me an opportunity to practice what I learnt and I would inform my colleagues about their rights. I got a lot of criticism in the process. But I only became more determined in the face of all kinds of intimidation."

## Like Thatcher

Miebai, who has served as a member of the electoral commission, says Margaret Thatcher is her heroine. "I hope to be like her one day," she adds.

Opara Chikodinaka Iheoma was nominated to represent women on a probe panel set up to investigate some student's congress executives. "For the first time, I realised that women are truly discriminated against. The panel fixed a meeting for 4pm, but because they knew I was not ready to play ball with them, they met at 3pm. That inspired me to look for a platform and I joined parliament, where I was able to change standing orders." Odigie Osehibe Lawretta is the

president of the Rotaract Club at Ambrose Alli University. She has myriad achievements. The most important is that she has been able to determine to some extent what happens on campus. She recalls: "I have been able to sponsor candidates who won at elections. I got into politics when we agitated for good lecture halls. Even though there were obstacles in the beginning, I always remembered my father's advice. He used to say that your only limitation was yourself."

Lucia Onyewadunu, a law student at the University of Benin and the public relations officer for Queen Idia Hall, hopes to move on to national politics soon. She started out as a class prefect at Queens College and later contested the public relations officer post. She has role models in her own parents: "My mother is the president of the women's wing of the Onicha Olona Development Union while my father is vice-president of the men's wing."

The road to student leadership was very rough in the beginning. She received threats and her rivals published scandalous claims against her, but she marched on regardless. "I aspire to get to the top in student union politics and carve out a niche there for women. I also

hope to go into mainstream politics, either as a minister or senator," she says.

Armed with a list of her achievements, Uju Favour Okoye of University of Benin speaks of her ambition to become the first female president of Nigeria. "The mentality among our men is that women do not have the right to vie for any political office. I hope to set up a project that will boost female participation in politics."

Former president of the National Association of Nigerian Students Comfort Ogunye believes this trend should be encouraged so as to build a pool of female leaders who will act as an inspiration to younger women.

Ogunye is a member of the Female Leadership Forum, which seeks to prepare young women to become equal partners in leadership in the professions, communities and society in general. She says: "Discovering emerging leaders is crucial for the coming generations. We believe that the bottom-up process of leadership skills development, starting from secondary and tertiary institutions, is in the long run the mechanism through which women's aspiration to leadership in the larger society can be achieved."

By Ruth Butaumocho

## ZIMBABWE

# The children are grown; time to go back to class

**THE** auditorium exploded with applause as Idah Chiposi walked gracefully to the podium to receive her Bachelor of Education award. Tears of joy shone on the face of the 71-year-old as she recalled the sleepless nights she had spent in order to achieve her greatest dream – to get a degree. "I am overwhelmed," she told *Africa-woman*. "But I'm glad I made it."

Chiposi had a lot of difficulty enrolling at conventional universities but eventually found a place at the Zimbabwe Open University, a distance learning institution that gladly accepted her for the three-year course. She was the oldest student at the university.

Distance learning has thrown a lifeline to hundreds of Zimbabwean women whose education was interrupted for social and economic reasons. Inadequate qualifications, lack of fees and early marriage have conspired to lock women out of higher education. They have had to use secondary school grades or be content with certificates and diplomas – meaning their professional progress was just as limited as their qualifications.

It is no coincidence that women have had the short end of the stick in education: many parents were

not keen to educate their daughters in the early days, considering it a waste of money since they would be getting married anyway.

The Zimbabwe Open University, launched in 1999, offers women a chance to follow their dreams and get themselves qualifications that can work to their advantage. The university aims at providing "affordable, accessible, flexible, high quality and relevant education" in the southern Africa region.

Instead of rigid academic requirements, the university asks for a minimum of five Ordinary Level passes and professional experience. Prior learning, be it a formal course or other form of education, is taken into account. What this has meant is that women who settled for teaching diplomas after failing to qualify for university can now enrol for a degree course in the same discipline.

The university has remained

true to its vision: it is now the largest learning institution in Zimbabwe. Of the 13,836 students who registered last year, 5,687 were women. The percentage of women enrolled at the university has risen steadily over the years – living testimony of the fact that women are eager to put behind them years of neglect since their family commitments were difficult to combine with full time study.

Says Mutsa Ruvako, in her final year of media studies: "The courses are tailored to accommodate the demands of our hectic lives. I am able to do my assignments at home, attend to my children and go for lectures during the weekend."

Chiposi says the flexibility of tutorials enabled her spend quality time with her children and 10 grandchildren and left her ample time to do her assignments. She was, in fact, inspired by the fact that one of her sons was a lecturer

at the university.

The road to university has been long and hard, though. Women were particularly sidelined in education during the colonial era and it has taken strength, perseverance and determination to face up to the challenge of higher education. "I am a retired nurse and teacher but I never felt the need to stay rooted at home," she confides.

The university's tutorials are held in every province and some women bring their children and

their minders – just to make sure they do not miss class.

Primrose Kurasha, the acting vice-chancellor of the university, says women have the zeal to learn once they are presented with the opportunity. "Most women spend time bearing and raising children and also supporting their husbands, leaving them little or no time to advance their education. More women are taking it upon themselves to advance their education because they can now see the success that comes with it."

Kurasha has taken it upon herself to ensure that as many women as possible are informed of the opportunities that the Zimbabwe Open University presents. "There is nothing more empowering than education, and I am happy that the institution I head has managed to create the most convenient environment for women to learn."



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