

Millennium Cities Initiative

EARTH INSTITUTE | COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

MILLENNIUM CITY STORY: SUCSESSES IN GENDER EQUALITY AND GIRLS' EDUCATION

Girls' LitClubs Teach Literacy Skills and Boost Confidence

OVERVIEW

LitWorld, an NGO dedicated to improving literacy worldwide, and the Millennium Cities Initiative have been working together for some time, championing a number of LitWorld's celebrations of literacy in the Millennium Cities, including several successful World Read Aloud Days and a "Stand Up For Girls Rally" to commemorate the International Day of the Girl. In two Millennium Cities, Kumasi, Ghana, and Kisumu, Kenya, we have also worked together to create Girls' "Lit Clubs," which offer adolescent girls safe environments to cultivate literacy and speaking skills, build confidence and connect with their peers locally and worldwide.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Of the 774 million adults lacking basic literacy skills, two-thirds are women, UNESCO tells us, millions of whom reside in sub-Saharan cities, where MCI works. MCI's own research tells us that girls in the Millennium Cities are too often forced to drop out of school prematurely because they can't afford the books and uniforms, they shoulder burdensome household responsibilities, they're embarrassed about their menstruation and the lack of private toilets at school, they fall ill or become pregnant.

Yet we know that an educated girl will earn more, is less likely to contract HIV/AIDS and is more likely to produce a smaller, healthier, better educated family. MCI and LitWorld have worked together in east and west Africa, to avail vulnerable adolescent girls of the opportunity to develop intimate, privileged, lifelong relationships with literacy and learning.

ACTIONS TAKEN

Building on our existing partnership and our shared interest in empowering girls and improving their access to education, MCI and LitWorld collaborated with the public school systems to start four Girls' Clubs in junior high schools in Kisumu, Kenya's third largest city, and then, the following year, to establish 15 Girls' Clubs in junior highs in Kumasi, Ghana's second largest city. LitWorld trained female teachers, many of whom recall all too vividly the pain and perils of being neglected or maltreated as girl students, as Girls' Club Coordinators schooled in a curriculum that celebrates girls' strengths, including their capacity for empathy and leadership. With support from the New York Community Trust, MCI has been able to support these programs with materials, transport and dedicated MCI Education Coordinators in both Millennium Cities.

The Girls' Clubs have already proven themselves to have a profound impact on the lives of both the young female participants and their teachers. Girls at risk have been identified through the Girls' Clubs, triggering life-saving interventions where needed, and, in general, girls and their teachers have had the opportunity to connect as young women, to share stories, hopes and dreams, to demonstrate compassion for other girls and women who seem to have less than they do, and to learn how to advocate effectively for these girls, and for other causes about which they feel strongly. MCI and LitWorld have just received a small grant to develop an online platform where these and other girls can post their stories, their poems, their joint research or art projects, sharing them thereby with other girls across the globe, expanding their horizons and vastly diminishing the distances across geographic, ethnic and class lines.

RESULTS ACHIEVED

MCI and LitWorld have trained 40 female educators to lead 19 Girls' Clubs in Kisumu and Kumasi, in association with the public school districts in both cities. The clubs are already having a significant impact on the more than 600 participating girls, on their teachers and on the communities: one Kisumu school principal told LitWorld's Director that they are "causing a ripple effect that is literally changing our schools overnight."

Both cities are scaling the program this coming school year, Kumasi by doubling the number of Girls' Clubs to 30, Kisumu by covering twice as many girls and, seeing the advantages the curriculum can bring to adult women, and recognizing also the tremendous challenges facing at-risk boys in and out of the school system, by expanding the program to create Mothers' and Boys' Clubs, as well. In 2012 MCI and LitWorld will develop an online platform to connect girls, their teachers and mothers (and hopefully brothers!) worldwide and will incorporate mobile technology as another way to access the curriculum and other materials. We are excited to be working toward expanding the curriculum to include training in such crucial topics as financial literacy, entrepreneurship, gender sensitivity and family health and hygiene, and we hope to be able to bring this cost-effective, life-saving intervention to girls in more Millennium Cities in the coming year.



A Kisumu Girls' LitClub celebration (2011).



ISUOG's Professor Ann Tabor teaches Kumasi medical professionals to use the ultrasound machines.



Kumasi girls join a "Stand Up for Girls" rally, celebrating the International Day of the Girl to promote girls' right to literacy.



Girls in the Magadi LitClub in Kisumu recite a poem they recently learned for visitors from MCI.