

## VOiCE and MCI Hold First-ever Girls' Forum in Nima-Maamobi Neighborhood, Accra, Ghana

### Girls Speak Out on Education, Local Sanitation and Community Life

By Abdul Rashid Alhassan, MCI Community Development Consultant, Accra

#### INTRODUCTION

The first Nima-Maamobi East Girls/Young Ladies Forum was held in mid-December at the newly established, MCI-supported Nima East Youth Community Center, on the Islamic Training Institute grounds in Kanda, in the Millennium City of Accra, Ghana. The forum was sponsored by the Millennium Cities Initiative and coordinated and moderated by Nima-based youth NGO, Volunteers in Community Empowerment (VOiCE).

The objective of the forum was twofold: to sensitize girls and young women on issues in the community of particular relevance to them, such as education, sanitation, health, hygiene, safety and physical upgrading; and to allow the participants to voice their concerns about said issues within the community and to propose and discuss possible interventions that might improve current conditions.

The theme of education was given priority emphasis for this forum. VOiCE recruited two young women role models from the community to speak at the forum: Miss Khadija Abdul Samed, a student at the University of Ghana and a presenter at Radio Universe, and the forum Chairwoman, Miss Sumaya Issaka, a nurse.

In all, 72 girls and young ladies attended, most of them students living in the Nima, Maamobi and Newtown areas of Accra. Older youth and other female community leaders were not in attendance, in part due to their obligations to attend naming, marriage and funeral ceremonies, all of which generally take place over weekends.

The girls and young women had the opportunity to offer their perspectives on many issues, including on education, sanitation and hygiene, safety and community planning.



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**VOICE IN COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT  
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH  
MILLENNIUM CITIES INITIATIVE  
ORGANIZED  
LADIES (WOMEN) FORUM**

**Theme : GIRL CHILD EDUCATION FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

**Chairperson: Hon. Hajia Damata Sulemana**

**Speakers:**  
Madam Khadijah Abdul  
Madam Mariam Salifu (Mothers Club)  
Mr. Ahmed Mustapha: Board Secretary (voice)  
Mr. Jose Ernesto Melara: Country Representative (Millennium Cities Initiatives)  
Mr. Abdul Rashid Alhassan: Environment & Community Consultant (Millennium Cities Initiatives)

**Date: 14th December, 2013. (Saturday) Time: 8:00am**  
**Venue: Islamic Training Institute (Community Hall) Kanda**

*All Girls, Ladies And Mother's Are Welcome*

## EDUCATION

The main speaker, Miss Khadija Abdul Samed, spoke on the theme, “Girl Child Education For Community Development,” and advised the girls as to the importance of education for girls and the need for making every effort possible to stay in school. The participants were urged to complete Junior and Senior High School, to strive to enroll in universities and other tertiary institutions and, if possible, to complete master’s and doctoral degrees. Miss Samed urged the participants to ensure that they receive a holistic education, including academic study, home or informal education and religious education, to help them develop into complete, fulfilled adults. She also encouraged them to have the time to also develop their “God-given talents,” even as they strive to receive a formal education.

Miss Samed told the group that, despite having done very well in school, while she was still a student her own parents nearly gave her up to be married to an old man from another community, prompting her to run away to live with a friend’s family, which paid her tuition fees and provided for her basic needs. With the help of some teachers and respectable members of the community, she was finally able to reconcile with her parents when she successfully entered into the university. She used this personal experience as an example, as she advised the assembled young women and girls to avoid partaking in negative activities that might lead to early pregnancy and its attendant problems.

Miss Sumaiya Issaka advised those interested in skills development after school to work very hard in whatever skill they choose and also to learn new skills, such as soap-making, batik tie-and-dye and bead-making, rather than hairdressing and tailoring, for which the market within the community is already oversaturated.

## THE MAIN CHALLENGE IN EDUCATION

The main challenge the girl students raised with regard to receiving quality education in their community was their own parents’ lack of interest in their education, as compared to that of their brothers. The girls said that this attitude originates in both the cultural and religious perspectives that most adults in the community have for girls in general. According to the participants, most parents did not encourage or support their girls to go to school, with some even holding the notion that an educated woman will become too proud and would not be submissive to her husband, as demanded by the culture and religion.

To address this challenge, participants asked that the community members, especially the adults and parents, be advised on the importance of girls’ education and the need to support the girls equally to the boys, especially when they are doing well at school. In relation to this point, the participants expressed disappointment that none of the members of the area Mothers’ Club were present to listen to what they had to say.

Another key challenge was the lack of parental control and support, especially when the girls get into their teens or once they leave school. They reported that some of them fall prey to men’s advances because once they reach their teens, most parents no longer provide for them, hence they are left to provide almost everything they need themselves. They therefore yield to these men, who give them money to eat and clothe themselves. However, sometimes “things get bad” when they become pregnant, as some of the men deny responsibility and leave the entire burden of taking care of the child on the young mother, who has no other source of income.

To address this problem, the participants advised that parents should be sensitized to provide for their children into their teens, especially the girl child, so that she not fall prey to some of these unscrupulous men. They said that for this sensitization to be effective, the community religious leaders should be engaged to convey the message, since most adults in the community value their teachings and instruction as part of their religious duty.

As to why most participants say they dropped out of school, some mentioned financial challenges on the part of their parents as the main issue, saying that the increased costs of schooling was the reason their parents could not support them in school. Others were of the view that some parents do have the money, but that it was a case of misplaced priorities on the parents’ part. They asked that NGOs help to provide support in the form of tuition fees and books, to help young girls pursue their dreams.

## ON SANITATION AND HYGIENE

Chairwoman Miss Sumaiya Issaka spoke to the young ladies on the importance of personal hygiene and maintaining a good and healthy reproductive life. Access to proper sanitation and waste management in the community was mentioned as one of the key challenges faced by girls and young ladies. They mentioned that the lack of adequate and proper sanitation drives them to practices such as defecating in plastic bags and in drains, thereby exposing them and the entire community to cholera and other related diseases. To address this problem, they advised that the AMA either provide sanitation services or compel landlords to provide sanitation facilities in their houses.

## SAFETY

The issue of safety at night, especially around some of the routes in the communities, came up as one of the challenges faced on a daily basis. Reports of ladies' phones and bags being snatched from them at night are common, and the participants urged that the local Assemblyman and the AMA in general work toward replacing broken light poles and also adding new ones, especially in the darkest areas, since the thieves/robbers seem to operate under cover of darkness.

## OTHER ISSUES

The young ladies were also advised to take keen interest in community activities and development and to get involved in community works by offering time through volunteerism. The Chairwoman asked the participants to make it a point to always add their voices to community issues and not to leave it just to the men to decide everything that goes on in the community. She also advised them to always seek advice from respectable members of the community on key issues and challenges that confront them, and to respect their parents, so that they will be well provided for and supported in whatever they choose to do.

## SUMMARY FORUM FINDINGS

In summary, the forum participants identified the following constraints to receiving adequate secondary and tertiary school education:

- Lack of funds for parents to pay for tuition and school materials;
- Inadequate investment in girls' education due to attitudes detrimental to girls, attributed to cultural and religious beliefs (boys should attend school while girls should learn to be submissive, etc.); and
- Teen girls resorting to otherwise unwanted relationships with men in exchange for financial support, often resulting in teen pregnancy.

Forum participants recommended that intensified stakeholder outreach (parents, religious and opinion leaders, etc.) aimed at promoting girls' education, coupled with additional donor financing for school tuition and materials, would have the most effective impact towards improving girls' education in Nima and Maamobi.

Challenges specifically faced by girls/young ladies in the communities pertaining to sanitation and safety were attributed to low public sector investment in infrastructure upgrades in toilet facilities and street lights. The participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the municipality's service provision and requested increased investment, particularly in sanitation services.

### CONSTRAINTS TO EDUCATION

- Lack of funds for parents to pay for girls' tuition and school materials
- Inadequate investment in girls' education due to cultural attitudes detrimental to girls
- Teen girls resorting to unwanted relationships with men for financial support, often resulting in teen pregnancy



## KEY FORUM ACHIEVEMENT

The key achievement of this first girls' and young women's forum was the provision of a venue and an enabling environment for the girls/ladies to share ideas as to their challenges and priorities in their local neighborhoods. The reduced presence of males was seen as a key measure to allow candid discussions among the participants for this first critical session.

The participants were also informed of VOiCE's upcoming community waste management project, which MCI is supporting, and they were advised to help the project become a success by advising parents to welcome the project and support it.

VOiCE staff used the opportunity to inform the young ladies about VOiCE and what it is trying to achieve. They also automatically signed the ladies onto a planned ICT training programme, which will take off this year, also with MCI support, as soon as the new Centre is finished and operational.

MCI agreed to review the suggestions and recommendations issuing from this initial gathering, to help VOiCE identify potential partners capable of assisting with their implementation and to support more Girls' and Young Women's Forums in the coming months.



## ABOUT THE MILLENNIUM CITIES INITIATIVE

The Millennium Cities Initiative was established to help selected, under-resourced municipalities across sub-Saharan Africa eradicate searing urban poverty and attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). MCI assists the "Millennium Cities" – generally regional capitals near to the sites of the Millennium Villages Project (MVP), MCI's sister integrated rural development effort – in identifying critical gaps in realizing the MDGs, as well as the financing, programs and partners capable of filling them. MCI's extensive network of partners around the world – including investors, philanthropists and entrepreneurs; nonprofits and corporations; and governmental and multilateral institutions – joins MCI in the belief that, for the first time, our generation has the opportunity to complete an urban transformation across Africa and beyond.