



TURNING A WHISPER OF CHANGE INTO A HARMONIZED CHORUS: ETHIOPIAN GIRLS FINDING THEIR VOICES.

In the vast highlands and sun-scorched valleys of Ethiopia, where ancient empires once stood, with languages flowing like tributaries into the Nile, a quieter resolve has been unfolding in classrooms, schoolyards, and makeshift stages. It wasn't a revolution marked by banners or marches, but by synchronised voices—especially those of girls—breaking centuries-old silences. At the heart of this resolve was Tuseme: "Let Us Speak Out."

Originally born in Tanzania, later nurtured in Uganda by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), the Tuseme model found its Ethiopian rhythm in the early 2000s. It did not arrive as an import but as a conversation, adapting its Swahili soul to Ethiopia's cultural heartbeat, where over 80 languages and a mosaic of traditions converge. It spoke in Amharic, Afan Oromo, Tigrinya, and Somali. It danced to local drums and addressed issues that had silently lingered in the shadows of classrooms for too long.

To appreciate Tuseme's orchestrated journey in Ethiopia is to understand the profound contrasts that shape this country. Ethiopia is a land of emperors and pastoralists; of bustling Addis Ababa and remote, mountain-cloaked villages. It is a country where girls walk for miles to school, sometimes through terrain as rugged as the gender norms they are expected to navigate.



When FAWE-Ethiopia adopted the Tuseme model, the goal was clear: equip young girls with the confidence, tools, and cultivate community support to address gendered problems. Drama, music, poetry, and storytelling became their arsenal—not just to entertain, but to challenge, question, deconstruct, and reconstruct gendered assumptions. "At first, it was just a play," said Hana, now a secondary school teacher who once led her school's Tuseme club as a student. "But when we performed that play about early marriage, and my uncle saw it, he told my father to let me finish school. That play changed my life."

Tuseme clubs mushroomed in public schools, especially in the Amhara and Oromia regions. FAWE-Ethiopia, with support from development partners and the Ministry of Education, trained teachers in gender-sensitive facilitation and mobilized students to form clubs. And so the song grew louder. These are not just after-school hangouts. They are laboratories of social transformation.



Yet, Tuseme's journey in Ethiopia was neither smooth nor linear. It was a path littered with challenges, both structural and societal. In some conservative communities, resistance to the initiative was fierce. "Parents would come to school and tell us to stop teaching girls to be disrespectful," said a teacher from the Tigray region. "They thought girls questioning things meant rebellion. But we told them—it's empowerment, not disobedience."

Conflict in the Tigray region and political unrest in Oromia also disrupted school programs, disbanding clubs and displacing students. COVID-19 dealt another blow, as schools shut down and digital access was limited, especially for girls in rural areas. But, like a resilient bird-song that announces the light of a new dawn, Tuseme adapted. Virtual storytelling circles emerged in urban centers. Teachers, determined to keep the flame alight, assigned reflective writing exercises inspired by Tuseme themes. In some areas, radio programs carried the torch, broadcasting student-written plays and poems.

In the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), where languages shift every few kilometers and traditional values run deep, the Tuseme model became a bridge across diversity. In one village near Arba Minch, Tuseme plays were used to promote dialogue between elders and students. "We used traditional songs to talk about new ideas," explained a cultural mediator and club mentor. "That way, elders listened—not because we shouted, but because we sang."

In pastoralist communities like Afar and Somali, where girls face barriers to education due to mobility and early marriage, mobile Tuseme caravans were launched. These were not metaphorical—they were actual trucks fitted with audio equipment, curtains, and stages. They traveled from village to village, setting up temporary theatres where girls performed and led discussions. One girl stood in front of her entire village in Awash and said, "I am 14. I want to be a doctor. Marriage can wait. Education is urgent." Her words were met with silence, then murmurs, THEN, applause. That's impact.

FAWE does not just implement and hope. It evaluates. In partnership with HERS-EA and ACER UK, a consortium proposal was submitted to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and awarded a three-year research grant under the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) program. The goal is to assess how well the Tuseme model and related FAWE gender empowerment initiatives work—and how they can be adapted to support refugee and internally displaced children across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. Each country brings its own unique context, challenges, and opportunities to the research. ***This feature story specifically focuses on Ethiopia. For the full regional picture, you can explore the Kenya and Uganda chapters of this multi-country study via [this link](#).***



In April 2024, FAWE hosted the first physical meeting of the three-country research project in Nairobi, Kenya. Representatives from the FAWE regional secretariat, FAWE Chapters from the three countries, Higher Education Resource Services-East Africa (HERS-EA), and ACER UK came together to lay the groundwork for the research that would unfold over the next three years. IDRC was represented by Mr Taib Fall, Program Officer at the GPE KIX. Following the inaugural meeting, the pilot study was conducted in December 2024 at Bashewam Primary and Secondary School, located in the Kolfe Keraniyo Sub-City of Addis Ababa, to test the tools, methods, and assumptions of the research before rolling out full-scale data collection.

By January 2025, the research had entered its data collection phase. It expanded to mainstream schools across Ethiopia. Four schools were selected: Millennium Secondary School in Addis Ababa, Nafyad Secondary School in Adama, Tabor Secondary School in Hawassa, and Bahir Dar Academy in Bahir Dar. These schools provided a diverse representation of Ethiopia's educational landscape, ranging from large government schools to private institutions, urban to regional schools. The research team engaged with teachers, students, and administrators to assess the impact of Tuseme and gather data on its implementation, challenges, and successes.

FAWE-Ethiopia organised logistics for the research by mobilizing mapped stakeholders and securing necessary approvals across various sites. HERS-EA led the research itself, and ACER UK designed the research tools and handled quality assurance. Operating under the umbrella of the FAWE Regional Secretariat since 1994, the Ethiopia chapter has a longstanding commitment to advancing gender equity in education. It is formally recognized as a national NGO and was re-registered in 2010 as an Ethiopian Resident Charity Organization. With its main office in Addis Ababa and a presence in 11 sub-national chapters spanning 9 regions and both city administrations, FAWE-Ethiopia has focused on ensuring that girls and young women are not only enrolled in school but are supported to thrive and complete their education.

In February 2025, the second physical meeting was hosted by HERS-EA in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This meeting served as a checkpoint for the ongoing research, where preliminary findings and broad lessons learnt from Year 1 were discussed, and strategies for the next phase were mapped out. Two months later, in April 2025, the research findings were validated, and the partners began to refine their recommendations that will inform adaptation and scaling of the Tuseme model in refugee and IDP communities.

Throughout this process, the voices of students were allowed to do the talking, in line with Tuseme's 'let us speak out'. One student (X) reported that joining the Tuseme club had been a transformative experience, particularly in terms of realizing the importance of empowering women. Another noted the positive influence of Tuseme on boys, who, inspired by the program, began to actively support and protect their female peers. There was also a teacher who reflected on the long-standing work of the school, saying, "Before we called it Tuseme, we were already doing what Tuseme is about, such as organizing events for March 8." March 8 is the designated UN International Women's Day. This statement captures the essence of Tuseme—an approach that builds on local traditions of community engagement, advocacy, and action. By enabling 'speaking out', the model tactfully challenges gendered norms and proposes interventions that empower girls, boys and the wider community.

The infrastructure changes driven by FAWE also left a lasting impact. One school, for example, saw the development of a library that became a hub for learning and empowerment. The investment in physical resources, such as financial assistance, reference books, and tutorial support for female students, further deepened the positive impact of the program.

Despite the successes, the Tuseme initiative faces challenges. One prominent obstacle raised during phase 1 data collection was the limited participation of Grade 12 students in the Tuseme clubs, a trend that the research team noted as a major barrier to the program's full potential. Some students, particularly in rural areas faced resistance from families and communities who feared that the Tuseme model would undermine traditional gender roles. However, the program's emphasis on dialogue and its ability to engage both girls and boys in conversations about gender equality is gradually shifting these perceptions.

Secondly, the importance of ensuring inclusive membership in the clubs, moving beyond academic performance as the sole criterion for participation, would allow for a broader range of students, including those from marginalized backgrounds, to benefit from the empowerment opportunities. Thirdly, dedicated and adequate funding for Tuseme club activities would maintain their momentum, particularly in schools with limited resources.

Fourthly, carefully defining the relationship between Tuseme and other gender-focused clubs, such as Gender Clubs would avoid duplication and ensure collaboration rather than competition. Addressing the specific challenges hindering Grade 12 student participation in the clubs is also a priority, as these students represent a critical cohort in shaping the future of gender equality in Ethiopia. Finally, the research stressed the importance of consistent follow-up support for the clubs, alongside encouraging collaboration with other relevant school-based initiatives to create a holistic approach to gender empowerment.

The scientific findings from this first phase of the research will be published in peer-reviewed journals and made available as knowledge products, including case studies, policy briefs, and digital toolkits, to inform further implementation of the Tuseme model in Ethiopia and beyond. These publications will present the program's successes and challenges and provide a roadmap for educators, policymakers, and researchers to build on the momentum generated by Tuseme.

Though Tuseme began as a platform for girls, Ethiopia's adaptation made a deliberate effort to include boys, acknowledging that girls' empowerment cannot thrive in isolation. Stakeholders observed that when boys are involved and understand the value of gender equality, they become allies rather than obstacles. One participant reported that he joined the club because he saw the adverse influence of social media on women and felt a responsibility, as a young man, to protect and support them. Another remarked that the inspiration to join came from the idea of empowering women. These voices reflect a subtle but powerful shift: gender justice in Ethiopian schools is no longer framed as a girls' issue but as a shared vision for equitable communities.

Today, Tuseme in Ethiopia stands at a crossroads. The political landscape remains uncertain, and donor funding has been inconsistent. Yet the groundwork has been laid in several schools across all major regions. As the world of music gets digitalized, so FAWE-Ethiopia, in partnership with UNESCO and local education bureaus, is now piloting a digital Tuseme toolkit—featuring scripts, training guides, and video performances. Plans are underway to introduce the model in teacher training colleges so that future educators carry Tuseme's principles forward. There is also talk of integrating Tuseme into Ethiopia's new civic and ethical education curriculum. If successful, it would mark a transition from a fringe extracurricular to mainstream—a fitting evolution for a movement that began with small feminine voices, into orchestrated songs reconstructing gender norms.



Ethiopia's musical story with Tuseme is still being written. It is a song in progress, a poem with unfolding stanzas. But if you listen closely—in the clapping of students after a school play, in the proud voice of a girl reciting her rights, in the silence of a father who is finally stopping to listen—you can hear the echoes of change.

In a land where emperors once ruled by decree, the change agents may just be those who dare to speak out.

Tuseme. Ethiopia is listening.

To learn more about how you can support Ethiopian girls finding their voices, please contact us at info@faweethiopia.org



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