



FROM SNOWY MOUNTAIN PEAKS TO GOLDEN SAVANNAH PLAINS: TRACKING FOOTPRINTS OF TUSEME'S JOURNEY IN KENYA

In the shadow of Mount Kenya's snow-dusted peaks, across the golden savannahs where herds of wildebeest carve ancient trails into the earth, and along the winding rivers that sustain life in the arid north, a quiet innovation has been taking root. It is an amplification of voices, especially the voices of girls, rising and traveling across Kenya's wide-open landscapes, like the impactful seasonal winds that sweep from the Great Rift Valley to the Indian Ocean. At the heart of this movement is 'Tuseme': Let Us Speak Out.

First ignited in Tanzania, Tuseme found fertile ground in Kenya in the late 1990s through the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE). Here, it was not just transplanted and nurtured, the growth path was mapped. It adapted to the rhythms of a country where over 40 ethnic communities and over 60 languages crisscross the terrain like migratory paths that have shaped life for centuries.

Kenya is a land of journeys. Girls have always journeyed across hills, climbed mountains, and descended into valleys to fetch water, across fields to attend distant schools, across invisible borders between tradition and change. When Tuseme arrived, it gave these journeys a new direction: inward, to find their inner voices, and outward, to speak them out into the world. When it comes to women speaking out in Kenya, one is reminded of the fact that the first African female Nobel Laureate, the late Wangari Maathai, rose to global prominence from humble beginnings in



rural Nyeri by speaking out on issues she was passionate about. In her, girls in Kenya have a formidable role model.

It started small. "We performed a play about early marriage. Before, no one listened to girls. But after the performance, people came to talk to us. They asked us questions. They saw us differently." From the city streets of Nairobi to the dry plains of Isiolo, Tuseme's message wound its way, not by internet or newspaper headlines, but through word of mouth, through performance, through story, moving from village to village like the river valleys and traders following ancient routes.

Tuseme clubs sprouted across primary and secondary schools. Students crafted dramas, songs, poems, and debates addressing vices like early marriage, gender violence, disproportionate school dropout rates, and discriminatory cultural norms. In the pastoralist communities of Laikipia and Samburu, where girls' paths were often predetermined early through arranged marriages, Tuseme offered a new trail to follow—a trail toward education, leadership, and choices. A club leader put it simply: "Before Tuseme, our journeys ended early. Now, we go further."

Yet the terrain remained rugged. In northern Kenya, cultural traditions held strong. "Parents would tell us girls shouldn't stand before men to talk," a teacher in Garissa recalled. "They thought we were causing trouble." Resistance, like mountains, was one of the barriers Tuseme had to navigate. But just as acacia trees sink deep roots to find hidden water, Tuseme dug deep. It engaged parents, elders, and whole communities through dialogue and public performances and built interlocking roots. The Tuseme 'caravan' was stronger and ready to roll on.

In pastoralist regions, colourful energised mobile caravans took performances and messages of hope to remote communities. In Nairobi, when schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, girls gathered in virtual storytelling circles, and Tuseme travelled across the airwaves through radio broadcasts.

To understand Tuseme's significance in Kenya, one must first understand the country's tumultuous yet inspiring history. Kenya is a land of juxtapositions; a place where skyscrapers rise above busy craft markets and the call of traditional drummers still echoes across the plains. It is a country where girls sometimes walk barefoot for miles, enduring scorching heat or heavy rains, just to sit in overcrowded classrooms. Like Wangari Maathai's beginnings, many still lack basic learning tools like a pen and a book, and miss school during menstruation, because they do not have the necessary sanitary napkins. But it is also a country where the voices of solution-oriented girls are beginning to be heard above the din of tradition, cultural barriers, and gender expectations.

When Tuseme was introduced in Kenya, the aim was clear: to give girls the courage and the tools to speak out. It was a chance for them to use drama, music, poetry, and storytelling as tools for social change and a catalyst for self-empowerment. Tuseme clubs began popping up like stars in the night sky, especially in Kenya's rural and urban schools. FAWE-Kenya, supported by the Ministry of Education and partners, trained educators to guide students through gender-sensitive facilitation, encouraging them to form clubs for the incubation of change. These clubs were not just extracurricular—they became sanctuaries where young girls questioned age-old norms and crafted new visions for their futures. As the performances spread across the country, from the bustling streets of Mombasa to the pastoral lands of Laikipia, students continued to voice their concerns and propose bold solutions. Through every poem recited and every debate held, issues like early marriage, gender-based violence, and educational inequity were highlighted. But Tuseme was not just about raising awareness; it was about inspiring action. We were struck by the impact of Tuseme clubs, during a visit to Embakasi High School, on the outskirts of Nairobi, where we witnessed student-based initiatives to encourage each other to stay in school and, to bring in a 'third dress' to help their friends who had lost everything in a recent flood.

FAWE does not just champion girls' education—it endeavours to review its impact. In collaboration with Higher Education Resource Services-East Africa (HERS-EA) and Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER UK), FAWE led a consortium that successfully secured a three-year research grant from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) under the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) program. The consortium's mission is to assess the effectiveness of the Tuseme model and other gender empowerment initiatives—and to explore how these approaches could be adapted to better serve refugee and internally displaced children across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.

While each country brings its own landscape of opportunities and challenges, this story turns the spotlight on Kenya's journey specifically. [Find the story of Ethiopia and Uganda here.](#)



The groundwork began in April 2024 when FAWE convened the first in-person meeting of the regional research team in Nairobi, bringing together representatives from the FAWE regional secretariat, FAWE chapters from the three countries, HERS-EA, ACER UK, and IDRC's Mr. Taib Fall. By December 2024, the pilot phase for Kenya was underway, trialing the research tools at AIC Kajiado Girls Boarding Primary School in Kajiado County. From there, full-scale data collection expanded across a diverse range of schools including Wasamo Girls Secondary School in Homa Bay County, St. Veronica Chebukaka Mixed Secondary School in Trans Nzoia County, Masaku Primary School for the Physically Disabled in Machakos County, and County Council Secondary School in Garissa County. Data collection captured perspectives from urban, rural, mainstream, and special needs education contexts.

FAWE Kenya (FAWEK) led local logistics through mapping key stakeholders, securing official permissions, and mobilizing school communities for the research rollout. HERS-EA oversaw the research process itself, while ACER UK developed the research instruments and provided quality assurance. Established in 1996 under Kenya's NGO Coordination Act, FAWEK has built a formidable reputation as an advocate for gender equity in education.

The momentum continued into February 2025, when HERS-EA hosted the second regional meeting in Addis Ababa. Here, partners refined their strategies for the next stage by reviewing early findings and sharing the lessons learned from Year 1 of the study. By April 2025, preliminary findings were validated to pave the way for recommendations that will guide how the Tuseme model can be adapted and scaled to support some of the region's most vulnerable learners—refugees and internally displaced children across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.

Based on scientific findings from phase one, the results show that since the introduction of Tuseme Clubs in Kenya, students across different schools have reported outstanding improvements in self-confidence, academic performance, and social engagement. At Wasamo Girls, a student reported that "since we started the Tuseme club, the performance of students has improved." Another member explained, "Before I joined the Tuseme club, I was afraid to speak in front of people, but now I can stand and talk confidently." Students described how Tuseme had helped them check in on each other, offer advice, and support one another. "If you see a friend who is not behaving well, you counsel her and help her improve," said a member, emphasizing the peer support preached by the club.

Despite these successes, challenges persist. Across different schools, students and teachers cited a major shortage of resources. At Masaku Boys, one student said, "We have only three computers, and the internet is unreliable." Another added that sometimes they miss out on activities because "there is no money for internet bundles." Financial constraints also make awareness campaigns difficult, with Chebukaka students explaining, "Charts are expensive, and we don't have enough materials for our campaigns." Teachers at County Council Secondary School emphasized the urgent need for improved infrastructure, including learning materials, proper sanitation facilities, and reliable transportation. Farming activities intended to support the club's sustainability have also been affected. "We want to farm and sell products to raise money for our activities, but we don't have farming tools or enough water," said one club member.

Time was another elusive resource. Students, shouldering domestic responsibilities like fetching water and firewood, struggled to carve out space for Tuseme meetings. "We set our meetings for Monday afternoons or weekends," explained a Wasamo Girls board member. Flexibility and fierce determination were cited as the 'oxygen' that kept Tuseme alive.

Cultural resistance added to the obstacles. In some communities, parents initially mistrusted the movement, fearing it undermined traditional norms. A Chebukaka student recalled, "My father asked me why I talk so much about boys and girls' issues. He thought Tuseme was spoiling us." Over time, as parents witnessed their daughters' blossoming confidence and academic achievement, support slowly grew, but cultural barriers to full expression persist, especially in mixed-gender spaces.

The scarcity of female teachers created further hurdles. "Sometimes it's hard to talk freely when there are only male teachers," one girl confessed. The absence of women mentors made it harder for girls to feel seen, safe, and heard.

Overall, Tuseme's relevance has only deepened. Club members now tackle urgent issues such as female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriage, and gender-based violence. "Because of Tuseme, some girls have been saved from FGM," reported a student from Wasamo Girls. In villages and towns, girls are no longer simply seen, they are heard; more and more, they are respected.



But the journey ahead demands holistic intention and investment from all. Many Tuseme clubs still rely heavily on external support. Students and teachers are calling out urgently for more resources: transport, materials, sanitation facilities, and above all, gender-sensitive spaces that allow every girl to thrive.

And so, from the dusty fields of Garissa to the green foothills of Mount Kenya, the voices that Tuseme awakened refuse to fall silent. They continue to wind their way through cultural rugged terrain, and, like drought-resistant rivers, they march on.

Through Tuseme, Kenya's young girls are not waiting for change; they are creating it.

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



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