



UGANDA: WHERE THE RIVER OF VOICES BEGINS

In Uganda, change often flows quietly, like the first trickle of water that eventually becomes the mighty River Nile. From ancient kingdoms to modern republics, this is a land where small beginnings can give rise to powerful currents. You only need to check out how a lone young girl, standing on a street corner in Kampala with a placard, protesting against inaction on Climate Change has become a global phenomenon. That once-upon-a-time a lone voice is, of course, Vanessa Nakate; in her own words, 'no voice is too small'. Today, a new current stirs, not only in rivers but in classrooms, community halls, and schoolyards. It moves through the voices of Uganda's girls, awakened and strengthened through the Tuseme model.

Long before Uganda was called the "Pearl of Africa," her people understood the power of the spoken word. Griots, elders, and storytellers held society together by weaving wisdom into the fabric of everyday life and passing it from mouth to ear. But for too long, the voices of girls were hushed, silenced beneath layers of tradition and cultural expectations.

Tuseme, meaning "Let us speak out" in Kiswahili, rekindles this ancient spirit in a new generation. It invites girls to rise, tell their stories, name their challenges, and envision a different future. From the schools of Arua to Yumbe, Nakivale, and beyond, girls are gathering like streams across the valleys and finding strength in solidarity. They are not just learning to dream but to voice and shape their own destiny.





But, like the rapids of the Nile as it cuts its path through stone and desert, the journey is not without obstacles and falls. Uganda's girls must navigate the barriers of poverty, cultural resistance, and fragile school infrastructures. Some walk miles to classrooms with leaking roofs and dusty floors. Others return home to families still believing girls should not "talk too much." Many face the scarcity of female mentors to guide them. Yet, despite the resistance, the river winds forward, giving rise to farming and becoming a source of life-literally.

One student shared, "Before Tuseme, I thought only boys could be leaders. Now I know my voice matters too." Another said, "Tuseme gave me the courage to stand before my whole school and my family."

FAWE, a firm champion of girls' education, does more than just celebrate progress; it assesses the impact of its efforts. In partnership with Higher Education Resource Services-East Africa (HERS-EA) and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER UK), FAWE 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. This 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 for refugee and internally displaced children in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. ***While each country has its own unique challenges, this story focuses on Uganda's journey—where the river begins. [Click here for country-specific update.](#)***

The groundwork for Uganda's study started in April 2024, when FAWE brought together the regional research team in Nairobi for the first in-person meeting. Representatives from the FAWE Regional Secretariat, FAWE Chapters from three countries, HERS-EA, ACER UK, and IDRC's Mr. Taib Fall gathered to chart the course ahead. By December 2024, the pilot phase kicked off at Balawoli Secondary School in Kamuli District, where research tools were first tested. From there, full-scale data collection spread to diverse schools across Uganda in February 2025: Bukomero Secondary School in Kiboga District, St. James Kagulu Senior Secondary School in Buyende District, Balawoli Secondary School, and Namasagali Secondary School, also in Kamuli District. These sites provided rich, comparative data from rural and semi-urban settings, and enhanced the understanding of how the Tuseme model could be adapted for both refugee and host community girls.

FAWE Uganda led the logistics, from mapping key stakeholders to securing official permissions and mobilizing the school communities for the research. HERS-EA oversaw the research process, while ACER UK ensured the research instruments and quality assurance. Established in 1997, FAWE Uganda is a guiding light of progress in girls' education. It advocates for a society where girls and women lead dignified lives. Their work spans policy advocacy, gender-responsive pedagogy, sexual and reproductive health, violence prevention, and resilience in education, alongside offering scholarships and support to vulnerable groups.

By February 2025, momentum continued as HERS-EA hosted the second regional meeting in Addis Ababa. Here, partners refined their strategies, reviewed early findings, and shared lessons from Year 1 of the study. Preliminary findings were validated by April 2025, which laid the foundation for recommendations that would guide how the Tuseme model could be scaled to support vulnerable learners in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.

While the Tuseme clubs initially thrived and empowered many girls, their long-term sustainability faced significant challenges after FAWE's direct involvement concluded.

In Uganda, schools like Bukomero Secondary had felt the impact of Tuseme. The Director of Studies recalled, "When I joined in 2010, the vibe was so high," reflecting the enthusiasm that initially surrounded the program. Teachers observed the positive outcomes: "Tuseme empowered students, especially girls, with confidence in public speaking and writing skills." Students also became more fluent in English, leading to better academic performance. Yet, when FAWE's activities ended, the program's sustainability was in jeopardy. The Director lamented, "When FAWE pulled out, everything ceased." The absence of a sustainability plan left the school unable to continue Tuseme's work, showing the critical need for long-term planning.

Similarly, St. James Kagulu Senior Secondary School in Buyende District experienced the power of Tuseme. A Board member said, "Tuseme gave the girls a voice—it empowered them to express themselves and be leaders." Teachers noted how students' leadership and writing skills blossomed, enabling them to debate and participate more actively. However, when external support ended, the program faltered. The Director of Studies remarked, "When FAWE withdrew, there was no clear plan to keep it going." This lack of institutional ownership exposed the vulnerability of relying on external funding.

At Balawoli Secondary in Kamuli District, Tuseme helped build confidence in students, particularly girls. A teacher noted, "Tuseme helped students gain confidence in public speaking and writing, skills that they still use in their studies." Yet, once FAWE's resources stopped coming, the program struggled to maintain its momentum. The Director observed, "When the resources stopped, it became difficult to keep it going." Staff turnover and lack of funding compounded the challenge, leaving the program's future uncertain.

Similarly, Namasagali Secondary School in Kamuli District benefited from Tuseme, with students showing improved leadership and communication skills. One teacher observed, "The girls became more confident and outspoken, overcoming cultural barriers that restricted their voices." Yet, when FAWE left, the lack of resources and institutional commitment meant the program couldn't continue. The Director of Studies pointed out, "When FAWE left, we didn't have the resources to keep the program alive." It was also noted that the packed curriculum often conflicted with club activities, limiting students' participation in the program.

The success of Tuseme in these schools was made possible by several enabling factors. The strong support of school leadership played a great role. At St. James Kagulu, the Board and Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) members championed the importance of empowering girls to take leadership roles. The availability of resources, such as computer labs and FAWE's physical infrastructure improvements, had also provided the right environment for Tuseme to flourish. Peer mentorship within the club had encouraged a sense of community and solidarity and empowered students to develop essential life skills.

However, disabling factors dampened the program's long-term impact. The over-reliance on external funding, particularly from FAWE, meant that once support ceased, so did the program. The absence of a clear sustainability plan and institutional ownership within the schools left Tuseme vulnerable to discontinuation. Time constraints within the school curriculum further hindered students' ability to engage fully with the program. The loss of trained staff and teacher turnover made it even more difficult to maintain momentum.





These are not small victories. Every girl who speaks adds a pearl to the chain of change. The river of voices is rekindled by nostalgic memories of Tuseme's impact; its current should get stronger, with emphasis on enabling factors and lessons learnt from previous rapids and falls. As Uganda continues its journey towards a more inclusive future, aligned with SDG4 (Quality Education) and SDG5 (Gender Equality), Tuseme stands as both a mirror and a bridge, reflecting the country's deepest values—resilience, community, hope—and offering a path forward shaped by the grit, wisdom and leadership of girls and young women, determined to be agents of change.

The Nile begins with a single spring, and so too does social transformation. In Uganda, the river of voices has begun to swell. And as it gathers strength, it carries the dreams of a generation determined to be heard and to shape the course of history itself.

The current is moving. The source is sacred. The voices are rising—and they will not turn back.

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



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