

INVESTING IN YOUTH EMPOWERMENT, SCALING GENDER EQUITY

How Tuseme Clubs Build Youth Confidence and Advance Gender Equity in Formal Education Systems in East Africa



2026



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE PROBLEM

Harmful gender norms, widespread gender-based violence, and high rates of early pregnancy continue to push girls out of school in Sub-Saharan Africa, with **66% of girls not finishing lower-secondary education in 2023**.



THE SOLUTION

Tuseme is a school-based **youth empowerment club** with a track record of success across 20+ countries in Africa. Tuseme clubs empower girls and boys to drive change in their communities. By harnessing the power of the creative arts, they equip members with the skills they need to advocate for and claim their educational and social rights.



THE EVIDENCE

A recent multi-country study in **Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda** confirms that Tuseme clubs **strengthen life skills**, such as public speaking and decision-making, and increase club members' self-esteem and aspirations. In schools where Tuseme is active, teachers reported more positive attitudes toward girls and a decline in issues like harassment.



SCALABILITY

Tuseme is low-cost and scalable. It leverages existing school structures and aligns with national and international education policies on gender and inclusion, making it suitable for integration into school systems at scale. The club's success in diverse contexts, from urban schools to rural communities, demonstrates its adaptability and relevance to local realities.

CALL TO ACTION

International donors are urged to **champion the Tuseme club** within the donor and policy communities and invest in **scaling it up across East Africa and beyond**. Backing expansion and refinement, especially within refugee and internally displaced communities, will enable thousands more girls and boys to "speak out" and drive grassroots solutions, advancing global goals on education and gender equality.

THE PROBLEM

Across East Africa, deeply entrenched gender norms continue to undermine girls' safety, education, and life opportunities. Gender-based violence remains widespread, with an estimated **42% of women and girls in the region experiencing physical or sexual violence in their lifetime**, often beginning in adolescence. Schools, which should be protective environments, frequently reflect the same power imbalances found in communities, leaving girls vulnerable to harassment and coercion. These conditions contribute to high rates of child marriage, early pregnancy, and school dropout, with pregnant girls facing discrimination and weak re-entry support.

As a result, with estimated 4.2 percentage point gap at the upper secondary level, **girls are disproportionately represented among out-of-school adolescents in Sub-Saharan Africa**, despite near gender parity in primary enrolment in many countries.

Beyond violence and pregnancy, restrictive expectations around behaviour and domestic roles limit girls' confidence, leadership, and ability to speak out against abuse. Boys, meanwhile, are often socialized into harmful masculinities that normalize harmful practices. Without intentional, school-based interventions that address these norms early, cycles of inequality and harm will persist.



THE EVIDENCE

The evidence put forward in this brief was generated from the **GPE KIX Tuseme - A voice for refugee and internally displaced children project**. The aim of the projects is to understand if and how the Tuseme model can be scaled into displaced communities across the East Africa region. It does this by studying the current model, conducting scoping exercises into displaced communities, and developing and testing an adapted Tuseme model.

The evidence used in this brief is from 98 focus group and key informant interviews with students, parents, teachers, policy makers, and wider stakeholders in 12 mainstream school settings in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.

THE SOLUTION

The Tuseme Model

Tuseme, a Swahili term for “let us speak out,” is a student-led empowerment club for girls and boys using arts-based dialogue to identify and act on barriers to education. At its core, Tuseme is about amplifying youth voices – especially girls’ voices – to solve problems in their schools and communities, and overcome gender-based challenges.

Tuseme was first developed as a school club-based intervention in Tanzania in 1996 and later championed by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE). Over the following three decades, Tuseme has evolved into a widely recognized empowerment model for gender equality in education, expanding across at least 17 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Since 1996, Tuseme has reached over 80,000 students and improved girls’ confidence, leadership, and academic success while fostering boys’ support for gender equality. The approach is now being adapted for refugee and post-conflict contexts.

How Tuseme Works

Each Tuseme club is a student-led forum, usually established in a school and open to girls and boys. A teacher patron (mentor) supports the club, but students take the lead.

Through participatory arts and dialogue – such as theater skits, songs, poems, debates, and role-plays – club members identify the challenges that hinder girls’ education in their context.

Once problems are identified, club members are guided to analyse root causes and brainstorm solutions. Common issues raised include school dropouts, early pregnancy, gender-based violence, lack of sanitary facilities, and other barriers the girls experience.

They then develop action plans to address these issues, with activities ranging from peer mentoring and advocacy campaigns, to engaging school administrators and community leaders for support.

IMPACT AND EVIDENCE

Field insights from Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia

Evidence from schools in urban and rural communities confirms that Tuseme delivers meaningful improvements in the lives of girls and their schools. Key impacts observed include **enhanced confidence and leadership** among girls and increased community engagement on gender issues.

KENYA

A school board member in Garissa County observed that after a Tuseme club was introduced, girls had a safe forum to raise issues and “the club has helped reduce early pregnancies” in the community. As a result, schools in the programme have noted **fewer cases of dropout due to pregnancy**, and a general shift in attitudes – what was once taboo to discuss is now openly tackled.



The Tuseme model is flexible and some schools adapted club activities to include vocational components, like tailoring, tree-planting and computer literacy, which helped club members translate confidence into practical skills. These activities proved highly motivating for students, strengthened parent buy-in, and illustrates the role Tuseme can play in economic empowerment.

“It has helped me to be able to speak in front of people. Before I joined this club, I was afraid to speak in front of people, but now I can.”

Tuseme club member, Masalani Secondary School

“I joined Tuseme so that I can get encouragement in some things that I cannot speak on. Maybe I have a problem at school, but I cannot go directly to my teacher, so I speak about it in Tuseme and get help”

Male Tuseme club member, Masalani Secondary School



IMPACT AND EVIDENCE

UGANDA

Educators in Ugandan secondary schools observed that Tuseme club members, especially girls, **developed strong public speaking, writing, and critical thinking skills**, which boosted their overall classroom performance. In Bukomero Secondary School, teachers reported that English fluency and exam results improved once students became active in Tuseme.

"Tuseme helped students gain confidence in public speaking and writing, skills that they still use in their studies"

-Ugandan patron teacher

[students'] "leadership and writing skills blossomed, enabling them to debate and participate more actively" in class and school governance

- St. James Kagulu Secondary, staff

By bringing gender issues into the open, Tuseme has encouraged school administrations in Uganda to **adopt more gender-responsive practices**, such as providing private changing rooms for girls and enforcing codes of conduct against harassment.

ETHIOPIA

In some Ethiopian schools, Tuseme initially faced parental resistance. However, by **actively involving boys and community elders** in the club's activities (e.g. inviting them to watch performances and dialogues), many came to realise that empowered girls were not abandoning their culture or values, but rather striving for a better future within their communities.

"At first, the community thought [the club] encouraged bad behavior, but now we know it helps girls stay in school"

Boys in Ethiopian Tuseme clubs became **vocal advocates** for their female peers' education. One male student said the club helped them **challenge the stereotype** that women should be housewives: "we have seen changes in our perspectives, realizing that when given opportunities, women can perform just as well as men".

"After taking the Tuseme training, we no longer fear asking for pads, even in front of boys"

- Tuseme female member, Nafyad Secondary School

ALIGNMENT WITH GLOBAL, REGIONAL, AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



SGD 4

Tuseme contributes to SDG 4 Quality Education and in particular, advances the SDG 4.5 target on eliminating gender disparities in education, by tackling the social barriers that keep girls out of school and by promoting equal participation in the classroom.



SDG 5

By giving girls the tools to claim their education and bodily autonomy (e.g. saying no to early marriage or reporting abuse), the model contributes to SDG 5's aims of ending harmful practices and ensuring women's full participation.

AFRICAN UNION STRATEGIES

Tuseme aligns with the African Union's Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (for example, the AU Gender Strategy 2018-2028) and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA).

NATIONAL EDUCATION AND GENDER POLICIES

Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia have incorporated gender equity goals into their national education sector plans and policies, notably :

- Kenya's National Education Sector Strategic Plan and recent National Policy on Gender and Education,
- Uganda's Gender in Education policy framework,
- Ethiopia's Education Sector Development Plans.



DONOR AND PARTNERS STRATEGY



Multilateral organisations and international donors like GPE, UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank, and UK FCDO have all prioritised girls' education and gender equality in their strategies. For instance, GPE's Gender Equality Policy/Strategy and UNICEF's Gender Action Plan.

Tuseme aligns with these priorities seamlessly. It constitutes a low cost, high impact investment for donors focused on girls' empowerment, youth leadership, or education in emergencies.

CALL TO ACTION

We call **international donors and education stakeholders** to support the **scale up of Tuseme** across East Africa through **investment, collaboration, and advocacy**. Together we can empower thousands more young people and embed this approach into education systems for lasting change.

"We used traditional songs to talk about new ideas. That way, the elders listened, not because we shouted, but because we sang."

– cultural mediator in Ethiopia

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Youth leadership and agency

1 Invest in **youth-led advocacy, peer learning, and mentorship** programmes like Tuseme, to strengthen students' voice and leadership within schools and their wider communities.

2 Support platforms that enable learners to engage constructively with school management committees and local authorities on issues affecting their safety and education.

Policy and System Advocacy

3 Become an active champion of Tuseme and support its **institutionalisation** within national education sector plans, life skills curricula, and school safeguarding frameworks, in alignment with gender equality, adolescent health, and child protection policies.

4 Embed **social and gender norms transformation** into delivery, by promoting Tuseme as a complementary component in existing education and health programmes.

Strategic investment and financing

5 Invest in the **testing, adaptation, and scaling** of the Tuseme model in under-resourced, rural, and humanitarian settings.

6 Fund **monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems** to track long term impact, build global evidence bases, and inform policy.

Community engagement

7 Work with schools and communities to strengthen **accountability mechanisms** that enable learners, particularly girls, to safely report concerns, ensuring schools function as protective and enabling environments.

8 Support sustained, **participatory community engagement** to raise awareness and shift harmful gender norms and practices, engaging parents, caregivers, community leaders, boys, and men.

LEARN MORE

FAWE, HERS-EA, & ACER UK (2025). The status of Tuseme in mainstream schools. GPE-KIX Tuseme: A voice for internally displaced and refugee children project report. DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.35030.51522](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.35030.51522)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This policy brief was produced by ACER UK. It draws on collaborative research conducted with the **Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)** and **Higher Education Resource Services East Africa (HERS-EA)**.

ACER UK is especially grateful to all students, parents, school leaders, teachers, policy makers, and community members in Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia who generously shared their time and insights throughout this study.

This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the **International Development Research Centre (IDRC)**, Ottawa, Canada, through the **Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX)**.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

Suggested citation :

Towne A, Krstic S, and Valentin E. (2026). *Investing in youth empowerment, scaling gender equity: How Tuseme Clubs Build Youth Confidence and Advance Gender Equity in Formal Education Systems in East Africa* (Policy Brief). ACER UK

