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Strength Through Flexibility

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Strength Through Flexibility

Development experts have long known that educating girls is one of the surest ways to improve life for everyone in poor countries. Yet the path to school has not been smooth for many girls—especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Over the past 17 years, however, the **Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)** has delivered high-quality education to millions of girls across 35 African countries. The secret to FAWE's scale and impact, say its leaders, is its flexibility. **BY KIM JONKER**

IN JUNE 1992, the five founders of what became the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) met at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center on Lake Como, Italy. Each woman was a minister of education in her home country (Burkina Faso, Gabon, Ghana, the Seychelles, and Zimbabwe). And each lamented that only half of Africa's school-age girls enrolled in school.

FAWE's founders understood the obstacles that girls met on the way to the schoolhouse. Many parents simply couldn't afford school tuition and fees. Others preferred to keep their daughters at home to perform household chores and to take care of younger siblings. Girls who did make it to school encountered such indignities as bathrooms shared with boys, discrimination from teachers, and sexual harassment from both teachers and students. For the few girls who did make it through elementary school, pregnancies often cut short their middle and high school educations.

But FAWE's founders also knew that the rewards were great for girls who did manage to secure an education. Educated girls were—and are—less likely to suffer from violence and harassment. They live longer and contract HIV/AIDS less. They have fewer and healthier children. And they make greater contributions to their country's economic productivity and growth, find numerous studies.

The five founders agreed that changing government policies was the best way to get more girls in school, so they dedicated their newfound organization to advocacy. In 1994, for instance, FAWE worked with the government of Malawi to make primary school free. Consequently, girls' enrollment in primary school more than doubled between 1990 and 1997, reports the Education for All 2000 Assessment Report for Malawi. FAWE went on to work with 12 national governments to demonstrate that removing school fees, as well as allocating money for girls' education, improved girls' enrollment rates. The organization also

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pushed governments to give scholarships to disadvantaged girls and to adopt programs that helped adolescent mothers to return to school.

Yet by 1999, FAWE's leaders recognized that getting girls into schools was not enough: The organization also had to make sure that the girls were receiving a high-quality education. Worldwide, attempts to increase both boys' and girls' access to education were leading to over-

crowded classrooms and exhausted teachers. Girls continued to face discrimination and harassment. And in some regions, violence was becoming more of a problem, relates Codou Diaw, a Senegalese national and FAWE's current executive director. "In southern Africa, girls were being raped on their way to and from school," she says. "How could girls be expected to learn when they had to worry so much about safety?"

So despite its original focus on advocacy, FAWE shifted its efforts to developing and disseminating best practices for girls' education across sub-Saharan Africa. "As we look back on that turning point," says cofounder and current board chair Simone de Comarmond, "we appreciate the importance of our organization's flexibility." That flexibility, she says, not only allows FAWE to respond quickly to emerging needs, but also to scale its efforts among sub-Saharan Africa's many diverse populations.

FAWE promotes flexibility by soliciting a plurality of voices and fostering collaboration while sticking close to its well-honed mission: to promote gender equity and equality in education in Africa. But flexibility does not come cheap, confesses Diaw. Out-sized travel budgets, high translation costs, long meetings, extensive training, and constant coaching are standard fare for the organization. Being flexible also means defying the pressure from management experts to maximize efficiency above all else. "We try to be efficient," says Diaw, "but never at the expense of our effectiveness."

Nairobi, Kenya-based FAWE has indeed proven its effectiveness. Working in 35 African countries, it is the leading nonprofit and the only pan-African organization promoting girls' education across the continent. Through FAWE's efforts, more than 12 million girls and women who otherwise would not have gone to school have received an education, estimates the Rockefeller Foundation. And FAWE achieved this feat on a modest budget, which has never exceeded \$5 million per year. For its accomplishments and leadership in the nonprofit sector, FAWE received the 2008 Henry R. Kravis Prize in Leadership.

MASS TAILORING

In its early years as an advocacy organization, FAWE established strong relationships with most of the ministries of education in Africa. The organization ultimately recruited more than 70 government officials to join FAWE's campaign to get girls in school. And with 19 governments, FAWE established formal memorandums of understanding agreements that transcend changes in personnel.

When FAWE's leaders shifted their operations toward improving educational quality, these alliances proved pivotal. Almost every

intervention, including training teachers in discrimination and harassment awareness, providing gender-sensitive learning materials, and distributing materials promoting math, science, and technology education for girls.

But reflecting its flexibility, FAWE has not created a franchise of cookie-cutter schools. Instead, the organization works with leaders in each community to customize its COE to local needs and sensibilities. "Because our communities are so different, our model schools have ended up being very different from one another," explains Diaw.

In the Kajiado District of Kenya, for example, the community recognized that it needed to offer girls refuge from abuse, forced marriage, and genital cutting. And so the Kajiado COE opened a rescue center to operate alongside the school. "The community led the initiative to create this rescue center," says Diaw. "But we have resisted the temptation to push the concept onto other communities, because they are likely to have their own needs and priorities."

FAWE then reached out to the district's Maasai chiefs, who hold much of the decision-making power in the community. After a FAWE-led workshop with these elders in July 2001, the chiefs came to understand how some traditional practices, such as early marriage, hinder girls' education. They also agreed that the time had come to improve the schooling of their girls. Now, the chiefs themselves bring girls to the rescue center and encourage girls to attend school.

Within three years of becoming a COE, the Kajiado Girls Primary School became the best school in the district. FAWE's 2007 annual report shows that the school has also significantly increased its pass rate, from 67 percent in 1997, to 75 percent in 2002, to a full 98 percent by 2007.

These results are not limited to the Kajiado COE. FAWE reports that every COE has increased its retention rates, improved girls' academic performance, and decreased teenage pregnancy rates. In Rwanda in 2003, moreover, 60 percent of the nation's top-performing students were enrolled at the FAWE Girls' School in Gisozi. In fact, the quality of the Rwanda COE is so high that now many of Rwanda's elite try to get their kids into the school—even though the school targets disadvantaged girls and was originally established as a shelter for girls whose parents perished in the Rwandan genocide.

The COEs confer more qualitative benefits as well, observes Katherine Namuddu, associate director of the Rockefeller Foundation's Africa Regional Program. "When I walk through the various COEs, what is most striking is the girls themselves," says Namuddu, who has worked with FAWE for the past 17 years. "They are outgoing, confident, and collegial," in contrast to the many shy and fearful girls at other African schools, she notes. "The social capital built by the COEs is simply enormous."

Codou Diaw (right), executive director of FAWE, visits with a student at one of her organization's model schools.

school on the continent needed to make its learning environment more welcoming to girls. Yet FAWE was a young and small nonprofit organization that could not reach even a fraction of these schools—let alone make sure that the schools implemented the suggested changes with fidelity.

So rather than exporting best practices to each school, FAWE first developed a network of 14 model schools, called Centres of Excellence (COEs), in which to showcase best practices in coeducation. The organization now invites teachers, principals, and policymakers to visit these COEs, which are located in 13 countries. Educators can then replicate the best practices in their own schools, adapting them to their local contexts. Meanwhile, policymakers encourage governments to incorporate these practices into their national education policies.

In selecting sites for its COEs, FAWE targeted normal government schools in Burkina Faso, Chad, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, Zambia, and other countries. It then deployed a common core of



Another FAWE program that is shaping schoolgirls across Africa into outgoing and confident coeds is called Tuseme (Kiswahili for “speak out”). FAWE’s leaders were concerned that in many African communities, the socialization of girls to be submissive and unquestioning was undermining their participation in the classroom and affecting their performance on national exams. FAWE’s leaders believed that teaching girls to speak up for themselves would help them overcome barriers such as sexual harassment and discrimination. So FAWE developed the Tuseme program, which it has disseminated through the COEs, as well as through other channels.

Using theatrical and role-playing exercises, Tuseme helps girls identify and analyze their problems at school, and then to create and perform in a play about those problems for the school community. In post-performance discussions, the community works with the girls to develop solutions to their problems. FAWE then establishes Tuseme Girls Support Clubs to provide ongoing help to the girls and to monitor progress.

As with other FAWE initiatives, Tuseme requires the nongovernmental organization (NGO) to be flexible. Although all Tuseme programs share the same techniques and training materials, Tuseme program leaders customize the content and approach to local contexts. “Even the terminology varies across regions,” notes Diaw: “In eastern and southern Africa, the Tuseme programs use the term ‘sexual maturation’ when discussing puberty. But in West Africa, people would find the term ‘sexual maturation’ to be very crude and would think I had lost my mind if I used it in a theater program!”

Although their results are not conclusive, several external evaluations of Tuseme suggest that the program may increase girls’ self-esteem and leadership skills while reducing teen pregnancies. The program may also improve academic performance.

Since FAWE introduced Tuseme in 1996, 14 African governments have adopted the program. Indeed, the Tanzanian Ministry of Education and Culture is implementing Tuseme in every one of the country’s 1,890 secondary schools.

SOLICIT MANY VOICES

To craft interventions for a continent with more than a thousand different languages and several thousand different ethnic groups, FAWE must solicit—and respond to—a multitude of voices. “Although there is a widespread and common need to promote girls’ education across all of Africa,” explains Diaw, “the specifics of those needs vary tremendously between regions and between ethnic groups.” In southern Africa, she explains, the big issues are HIV/AIDS education and protecting girls on their way to and from school and within school. In East Africa, retaining girls, especially in secondary school, is one of the main issues. Meanwhile, in West Africa, the issue of access is still very high on the agenda.

“We couldn’t be successful in promoting girls’ education without constant efforts to involve teachers and principals at every turn in

CASE STUDY QUESTIONS:

What should organizations do to meet the growing demand for girls’ education in Africa?

How can organizations accommodate cultural diversity among staff and clients?

How can nonprofits balance flexibility with mission focus?

When should organizations trade efficiency for effectiveness?

everything we do,” Diaw says. “We also constantly talk to children [both boys and girls] and solicit their views.”

In 2008, for example, FAWE organized a Girls’ Forum at its general assembly, which is held every three years and includes all of FAWE’s stakeholders. FAWE invited girls of different ages from across Africa to tell assembly attendees about FAWE’s work and to make recommendations about FAWE’s future priorities. As a result of the Girls’ Forum, FAWE is now seeking ways to use social networking technology to foster mentoring and conversations between the various generations of “FAWE girls.” The organization also wants to use social networking tools to get more real-time feedback from the girls.

FAWE also solicits the voices of donors through an annual meeting, which includes as many as 40 different donor organizations and partners. At the 2007 meeting in Nairobi, for instance, FAWE asked meeting participants to comment on the organization’s strategic plan. Many of the donors felt that the plan placed too much emphasis on FAWE’s organizational development and not enough emphasis on its program development. In response, FAWE increased its budget for its national chapter programs and decreased its budget for the Nairobi headquarters’ overhead, says de Comarmond.

ENCOURAGE COLLABORATION

Including many voices is necessary but not sufficient for FAWE’s flexibility and, ultimately, its success. The organization must also cultivate a strong spirit of collaboration to keep from getting stuck in endless disagreements between its many stakeholders.

To promote collaboration across its 35 national chapters, FAWE uses a four-pronged approach: emphasize learning from one another and working together, provide funds for chapters to visit each other, provide funds for projects between chapters, and codify the lessons learned in individual chapters and then share them with the other FAWE chapters.

By 2001, for example, the FAWE chapter in Ghana had developed an impressive puberty management program that made it easier for girls to stay in school. The program helped parents talk to their daughters about sexual maturation, offered affordable sanitary pads (the absence of which causes many girls to miss school for several days each month), and encouraged schools to separate girls’ and boys’ bathrooms. With funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, the FAWE chapters in Kenya and Uganda sent representatives to FAWE Ghana for a week of training. At the end of the training, the Kenyan and Ugandan representatives were equipped with the protocols and materials they needed to start their own puberty management programs. FAWE Ghana also helped FAWE Kenya develop a competition to induce more than 600 schools to improve their sanitation and create separate bathrooms for boys and girls.

FAWE also has a long history of collaborating with governments. In developing countries, NGOs and governments are often suspicious of one another, and so tend to work independently. Yet from

its founding as an advocacy organization, FAWE has nurtured strong ties with the public sector, which help the organization quickly scale up its programs and magnify its impact. For instance, rather than taking over the management of its COE schools—which are government schools—FAWE works with the government to improve them. Governments continue to pay teachers' salaries and supply basic infrastructure and curriculum, while FAWE works with community members to identify and respond to specific needs and provides additional teaching and learning programs.

Wherever possible, FAWE also works with other NGOs. For example, FAWE partnered with grassroots women's groups (including savings groups and cooperatives) to form an alliance for the education of rural girls. In the five participating countries, this alliance helped an estimated 2 million girls obtain resources for schooling. At the same time, the girls taught literacy and numeracy to the women in the grassroots groups. In another partnership,

FAWE's Tuseme program uses songs and theatre exercises to teach girls how to speak out on their own behalf.



FAWE collaborated with South Africa-based ActionAid International to distribute programs for reducing violence against girls.

"We can't do everything, and if we tried it would take a long time to acquire expertise in all of the new areas associated with girls' education," says Diaw. "Collaborations with other nonprofits allow us to meet emerging and diverse needs while remaining focused on our own core competencies and mission."

LEAN ON A FOCUSED MISSION

For many organizations, heeding so many voices and fostering so many collaborations could threaten effectiveness. But FAWE avoids this fate by hewing closely to its mission. In other words, FAWE is flexible *within* its mission. In practice, this means that FAWE has turned down many tempting opportunities because they fell outside the organization's purview.

For example, in 2002, the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) asked the Sierra Leone chapter of FAWE to work

with children who were living in camps for people displaced by the civil war. FAWE Sierra Leone was suffering from scarce funds, and so it carefully considered the lucrative proposition. But because the project did not involve girls' education, FAWE declined. Eventually, however, the UNHCR revised its program to include educational programming. With missions aligned, FAWE signed on, offering classes in literacy, numeracy, masonry, and weaving to the girls in the camps.

The organization has also withstood a great deal of pressure from various funders to alter its programming. For years, says Namuddu, one donor organization whose focus was on adult education refused to fund FAWE because FAWE would not expand its mission past girls' education. FAWE did not cave in to this pressure, but rather kept on writing to the donor. Finally, "it was the donor that caved," laughs Namuddu. Today, this donor is one of the most ardent supporters of FAWE's work.

FAWE has even returned money for a project that, once under way, drifted away from the organization's mission. In 2007, FAWE headquarters began executing a \$1 million grant (roughly 25 percent of FAWE's budget) to empower girls in post-conflict areas. But activities such as operating childcare centers for the girls' children and literacy programs for their mothers began to stretch the organization too thin. "We hated to risk jeopardizing our relationship with the funder, but we simply had to stay true to our mission," explains Diaw. Later, the funder encouraged FAWE to reapply for a new grant that was more in line with FAWE's mission.

At the same time, FAWE has undertaken rather unorthodox projects precisely because they promote girls' education. For example, when civil war rendered Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education practically defunct, FAWE stepped in and did much of the work that the ministry traditionally undertook, including building schools, hiring and training teachers, developing curriculum, and paying staff. Following the war, FAWE developed programs to meet the struggling country's new needs, such as education programs for girls who were raped by soldiers and who were victimized during the rebel attack on Freetown in 1999. In addition, FAWE launched a new program called Education for a Culture of Peace, which incorporates conflict-resolution skills into educational programs.

FLEX TO SCALE

FAWE's flexibility not only makes its programs more effective, it also allows the organization to spread its programs quickly across sub-Saharan Africa—a continent blessed with much of the world's cultural diversity, but burdened with much of the world's social problems. To foster this flexibility, FAWE heeds a plurality of voices and encourages collaboration while sticking closely to its mission. Other nonprofits that serve diverse stakeholders would also likely benefit from these practices. But organizations that serve homogeneous communities with similar needs might find that scaling one-size-fits-all solutions is a more efficient strategy.

"We constantly reinvent ourselves so that FAWE can stay in business," says Diaw. "But of course our hope is that our flexibility will enable us one day to go out of business, and for the right reason." That reason, she says, is that all the girls in Africa are in school, receiving a quality education, and forging a good future for themselves and the continent. ■