

The Sunflower Foundation (Australia) Inc.

The Literacy Garden

A Riley Orton foundation project (2018-2021)



SUNFLOWER
FOUNDATION

Seeding Hope Through Education

The Challenge

In Kenya, where success in life is determined by the final scores in national primary and high school exit exams, rural girls face the greatest challenges in succeeding in life. Adolescent girls in the remote village of Kanyawegi have limited opportunities to prepare them for successful life. They are overburdened by retrogressive and harmful cultural norms that treat them as second class citizens, deny them education, and their rightful place in the society as leaders and changemakers.

Unlike boys in the community, these girls do not have a safe place where they can meet, play and talk about their issues as girls after school. Despite great advances in technology, these girls are completely disconnected from the world. Their families do not have television sets or access to internet making them unaware of what is going on in the world, what the worlds challenges are and how they can create change. After school, while the boys play soccer, hang out with friends or do their homework, the girls remain in the village washing dishes, babysitting, fetching water and firewood 5 or more kilometres away. Girls cannot play in the fields because parents think they will talk to boys and get pregnant.

The majority of the girls have never owned or even read a story book, and lack literate parents who can read to them. Consequently, many severely struggle with reading and/or spelling, cannot comprehend passages or questions in tests while others are unable to read at all. Without the ability to read and write, they cannot learn and they are prepared only for failure. Without a mastery of basic literacy skills, these girls fail or give up and drop out of school. They are left with no opportunity but to start businesses that they see their mothers do, mainly smoking and selling fish. But to get the fish, they have to prostitute themselves to the fishermen in the village. Similarly, motorcycle taxi operators lure them into prostitution by offering money, food, sanitary pads and de facto marriages where they are abused and trapped into a perpetual life of poverty and infections with HIV/AIDS.

The Response

Many interventions to empower girls in Kenya have focused on keeping the girls in school and transitioning to high school by buying school supplies, paying school fees, leadership training, and sponsorship opportunities. The Literacy Garden addresses the lack of access to culturally relevant books, digital reading opportunities, functional libraries and low literacy levels that holds many poor rural girls and children from succeeding. Furthermore, we understand that literacy, though keys, is not the only skill rural girls need to lead sustainable lives.

Firstly, we want to lift rural girls out of poverty by providing opportunities which allow them to fall in love with reading and writing beyond the classroom walls. Using digital e-readers, they will be able to read from and publish to interactive online libraries of e-books created by children from all over the world. Literacy in a digital world should not be a privilege for the urban middle class that many rural girls and children cannot access. The e-readers will be powered by solar power cells and batteries.

Secondly, promoting literacy in a garden setting, outside the traditional classrooms and library walls will connect rural slum girls to nature and teach them about sustainability. They will develop their language and critical thinking skills further as they interact with the environment, learn sustainable gardening skills, and write essays about the environmental science. The fruit trees and other plants will provide a serene environment for girls to write and tell adventure stories and fairy tales further improving their literacy. The girls will learn to protect the environment, use clean energy and smart farming skills that they can carry to adulthood to improve food security.

An amphitheatre will provide a platform for the girls to tell their stories and address issues that affect them including gender based violence, wife inheritance, rape, and other important topics like life skills. It will also be rented out to the community members for events and other functions at a fee to help sustain the program eg buying story books and paying staff.

Thirdly, the well will provide the community with cheap clean water close to home as well as watering the gardens and fruit trees. The time freed from walking kilometres for water will enable the girls to attend the garden.

Measurement and Evaluation

We will use both quantitative and qualitative methods to measure our impact. Initial monitoring will include:

- the number of girls with basic literacy and numeracy skills,
- basic literacy rates among girls,
- average basic literacy skills in the primary schools the girls attend,
- students' performance in other academic subjects,
- as well as tracking improvement quarterly, we will monitor
- the number of girls who enjoy reading stories for pleasure,
- the number of girls who have written own stories,
- the number of stories published on online platforms,
- the number of parents who read to their girls and children,
- number of parents and teachers trained through participation in literacy garden programs,
- percentage of girls who can read age-appropriate stories fluently.

In the course of implementation, our staff will observe literacy activities at the garden and conduct student assessments using Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) toolkit to help us evaluate the quality of the program and student learning. We will also track the impact of the books and e-readers on attitudes to reading, reading behaviour, comprehension and language skills. We will also do case studies of beneficiaries visiting the Literacy Garden, and interview parents, teachers and students through sample surveys.

The Impact

500 girls aged 5 to 16 years from 7 rural schools in Kanyawegi village, drawn from preschool, primary and lower secondary school will be connected directly to reading and learning resources. 300 households, translating to at least 1500 individuals directly drawing water from the bore well saving them agony of walking 3-5 or more kilometres and providing more time for girls to attend literacy sessions.

Girls will also access reproductive health training, counselling, sanitary towels, mentorship. They will learn to be global citizens, sharing their stories with the world on online platforms. Teachers and parents will learn vital skills to promote literacy both at home and school through regular workshops. It will also eliminate barriers to reading content by providing digital content and relevant books and other reading materials. It will help grow young writers by promoting writing among marginalized girls and children allowing them to find their own unique voices and gain confidence in their communication skills.

Overall, it will increase transition of rural girls from primary schools to high schools, and to college by ensuring that they gain sufficient reading fluency to comprehend what they read and improve their grades, confidence, and critical thinking skills crucial in succeeding in today's competitive world.



Elizabeth telling stories in the Literacy Garden