

Building Girl Advocacy! and Community in the Wajir: Supporting Victims of Gender-Based Violence**Background/Context**

Along the border of northeastern Kenya, lies 3 of the country's poorest counties: Wajir, Mandera, and Garissa. Underfunded and isolated from the rest of Kenya, the region's development is stunted and debilitated by an ongoing border war fought against Somalia. Within these counties, a community of Somalis has lived since 1963. Although marginalized since Kenya's conception in 1963, Kenyan-Somalis have cultivated a place of belonging in this region.

Somali girls and women in Wajir, especially, are at a high risk, because, alongside poverty, they face sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) within their community. A baseline survey conducted and published by CARE Kenya—an international humanitarian group that supports health assistance throughout the country—indicated that SGBV is widespread throughout Kenya's northeast, attributing a number of longstanding cultural practices that perpetuate violence against women, such as early child marriages, as well as gendered and cultural roles that inhibit girls' access to education. Unmarried girls between the ages of 9 and 15 are the most vulnerable because they spend most of their time herding goats and therefore are highly vulnerable to perpetrators. These girls are marginalized and not given equal opportunities for education as their male counterparts. Other social and cultural norms, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, as well as economic barriers, persist. In 2003, Kenya enacted a law that made primary education free. The Borgen Project—an international organizational that combats global poverty—reported that as a result of this legislation, enrollment rates increased to 84%. Although this legislation created a positive outcome for the country at large, in regions like Wajir, where poverty and gender inequality are particularly high, only 19% of girls are in school. Due to high poverty rates, parents must choose which child to educate. In most cases they will educate their sons.

While schools can be a safe space for attending girls, other girls lack a chance to gain knowledge on sexual violence, reproductive and sexual education. Somali girls and women are also fearful of the shame and stigma that arise from being sexually assaulted. They shy away from reporting perpetrators because the traditional courts (*maslaha*) are outdated. The *maslaha* system undermines the constitutional judicial system because it does not allow for an impartial trial to take place that will decide retribution for committed crimes. Instead, it allows monetary compensation for sexual assault cases—a perpetrator, for example, typically pays in goats (usually about ten) or might pay Kshs 5,000 (80 USD for replacement clothes to the survivor's family—which are unsatisfactory to survivors who should rather report rape and defilement cases to the police. Most sexual violence cases are settled outside the formal legal system. Between November 2003 and June 2005, a total of 295 survivors of sexual assault were seen at hospital; however, only 35 were ever taken to court (CARE Kenya). In addition, girls and women find it difficult to report cases of assault because they are unaware of being able to advocate themselves—they do not know how to approach the police and, in most cases, the girls will tell family members who insist they keep their assault secret. This is due mainly to the fact that SGBV survivors are publicly discriminated against, driving mothers to ask their daughters to be secretive, thereby ensuring future marriage prospects.

**Project Vision and Goals**

I want to equip Somali girls in Wajir with the correct resources to assess, report, and protect themselves against SGBV by providing high-quality educational materials, programs, and a community space where they might come together to network and heal through private and group discussions. In order for them to feel safe within their own community, they need to be trained on how to converse with law enforcement and community leaders. I need to ensure that police officers, community leaders, and local non-profits will ensure confidentiality and non-discriminatory practices when engaging with sexual assault victims.

Thus, I propose to create a leadership and empowerment program focused on advocacy and the creation of a community network through secondary schools in Wajir, namely, Wajir Girls Secondary

School, Hon Khalif Girls Secondary School, and Kutulu Girls Secondary School. We intend to target 15-20 girls from each school with a training program on SGBV, encompassing other life topics such as sexual and reproductive health, which will give them more comprehensive knowledge of themselves. The program will include leadership training on public speaking, advocacy, negotiation, and communication.

Once the training program is complete, I will dedicate my time to providing resources for the girls to use their newly-acquired knowledge on SGBV, reproductive, and sexual health to teach other girls through different primary schools across Wajir. It is my goal to inspire others to use their voice in a place that has made them voiceless. My ultimate goal is to create a leadership and empowerment club in each of the secondary schools that will meet monthly, working within their schools even after the program's end.

#### **Four Local Partnerships**

The Girlkind organization, founded in 2008 by Rukiya Abdulle, the first elected female member of the county assembly (MCA) in the northeastern region, will be my main local partner. Girlkind works towards girls' education and aims to increase the number of girls attending school in Wajir. Also, the organization's main work is to provide sexual and reproductive health courses to the women in the community and provide them with sanitary products. I am working with this organization because they have been at the forefront of empowering young girls in the county for a longtime. I have volunteered with the organization several times before, whenever I have visited the country. I will be working closely with their organization to create a safe place for girls during the training program.

Wajir Peace Foundation is an organization whose mission is to raise awareness about marital abuse and sexual violence against women. I am partnering with this organization because of the work they have done with married women. The organization teaches women about their legal rights and helps them out of abusive relationships. They have offered to provide speakers from a legal background to teach the girls about their legal rights.

Also, I am in contact with the principals of the three secondary schools in which I am recruiting trainees and, most importantly, local tribal leaders know and support my project. Through the local chief, Abdi Garre, I have reached out to leaders of the Degodia, Garre, and Ogaden tribes. Those leaders, with whom I conversed during my last visit in December 2020, were happy to talk to me about my project and told me to reach out if I needed any help.

#### **Implementation/Timeline**

Staff recruitment: May 21 – 23

Meet with Wajir Girls Secondary officials to develop curriculum: May 28 – June 9

Team training and orientation with Girlkind and Wajir Peace Foundation: June 11 – 22

Program weeks 1 – 4: Senior girls Training program: June 25 – July 25

Week 4 – 7: Primary School Presentations: July 28 – August 8

Week 7 – 9: Network creation and Library Project

#### **Potential Impact/Sustainability**

To ensure the project's sustainability, we will create a Women Empowerment Club at the 3 secondary schools. The trainees will be head of the clubs at their schools and recruit and pass the leadership to the others after they graduate. Together with the GirlKind organization, I want to begin a small library at the Wajir Girls Secondary school. The principal has said she would provide room for this, and the library will be open to any of the girls from the community. The library will include books on gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health relevant to the program. However, the library will also include literature from women across the world, most importantly African women. I hope that the library will act as a safe space for the girls to converse and learn from each other.