

*On Wednesday, September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Yasmin Abdullahi Zoomed into the Fellowships at Mount Holyoke office to relay her recent experience in Wajir, Kenya with her Davis Projects for Peace grant project. Since returning to her home just outside Minneapolis, United States from Kenya in late August, Yasmin has been focused on training for the LSAT test and entrance into law school. What follows is a summation of her time in Kenya, taken from the interview transcript.*

**Q: Yasmin, can you give us a two-sentence summation of your project?**

Yes, thank you. Our goal was to equip Somali girls in Wajir with the correct resources to assess, report, and protect themselves against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) by providing high-quality educational materials and programs. In addition, I wanted to help provide a community space for the girls, where they might come together to network and heal through private and group discussions.

**Q: Can you tell us about the origin/idea for your project?**

When I was younger, I had volunteered with Girlkind—an organization at the forefront of girls' empowerment—but I noticed a lack of attention towards SGBV. It seemed that if I partnered with Girlkind to help fill that void, I might develop something they couldn't. In addition, I had read several research projects that had discussed SGBV in Wajir, naming it the biggest problem affecting young girls and women. I wanted to do something.

**Q: Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?**

Somali girls and women in Wajir—a refugee community—are at especially high risk for SGBV. It is an endemic problem. During my first days there in June, for example, I learned that there had been an uptick in rape cases in Wajir over the few months prior and, consequently, was informed that many girls might not be allowed to leave home because of safety concerns. The girls and their families were afraid that they could be attacked and abused during journeys to and from the program. Because of that, I had to find a closer location to host our program, especially if I wanted to get the girls to participate in the program. Additionally, we had to change the meeting hours from early mornings to middays to ensure safety because they would have their brothers or fathers walk them to the location. With a closer host-site and later starting-hours, we were able to attract more girls to the program. However, the fear of SGBV is sadly always in their mind—the precise issue my project addressed.

**Q: Can you tell me more about your host site, the community it served, and what it was like to work there?**

I chose this host site because I knew the founder, and GirlKind had also worked with some of the local schools and identified the girls most in need of help. This allowed me to run our program within an existing framework. Many girls were familiar with the organization and this made them comfortable to be part of the project. I had also talked with other youth-serving organizations and community leaders, and found a lot of support throughout the community.

The host site was very welcoming and great to work in, mostly because my partner organizations made it so easy to navigate the community—who to talk to, how to talk with them, and what to ask. I was familiar with the secondary schools there because I had relatives who had attended (or were attending) the schools. Definitely, the local support I received and my familiarity with the community made the project feasible.

**Q: What were some of your biggest challenges? And, if at any point you felt like the project was not going to work, what was the biggest issue?**

Oh yeah, at the beginning, I had set out to recruit students from Girls Secondary School in Wajir, but when we reached the community, many community leaders informed me that we needed to add boys into the program. The thought was that it was as important to educate the boys on the topic as much as it was the girls. I agreed with their ideas, but I did not think we would be able to get cooperation from Boys Secondary School. I had to reach out to them directly. This as we were busy recruiting

girls. On top of the challenge of girls coming to the problem because of the recent increase in SGBV, made me worry that we might not get many girls into the program at all, so I was a bit worried. However, in the end, we recruited both boys and girls, resulting in about 20 boys signing up for program in active dialogue with the girls, and becoming local advocates.

**Q: What were the challenges you faced in communicating with people through your project?**

Language! At first, it was difficult for me to communicate because everyone spoke Somali and my Somali was very rusty—having not spoken it much at home while living in America. My family stressed speaking in English. So, I decided to go to Wajir a month in advance, engaging regularly in conversation with the locals, and immersing myself in my extended family's life. By the time the program started, my Somali was much better, so I engaged in regular daily conversation. I could understand better what was being said. It also helped people (officials) trust me better, once they knew my story and if my language skills were a bit halting. It was difficult at first, but all of the secondary students had a great command of English, as well as Somali, and so we were able to communicate perfectly with each other. As for when I had to speak with other member of the community, I sought help from partner organizations when I had to translate important conversations with the police and the courts.

**Q: How have you come to define peace? And, do you think your project will contribute to both short-term and long-term peaceful living in the Wajir community?**

Great question! I think I define peace as safety and a lack of threat from physical harm. I also believe that peace is the absence of poverty and the fulfillment of basic necessities, like food, clothing, shelter and education. Many forget and neglect that education is a gateway to peace. It should be placed at the forefront as we strive for peace in our various communities.

Short-term, I know that we were able to recruit 15 girls from each of the three secondary schools and that with these girls, our training on SGBV, education on other life topics—such as sexual and reproductive health, giving them more comprehensive knowledge of themselves—and including leadership training in advocacy work, such as public speaking, negotiation, and community partnerships, we were providing resources for the girls to use their newly-acquired skills. I know that there were plans for these girls to teach other girls through primary schools across Wajir.

Long-term, we created Women Empowerment Clubs at the 4 secondary schools, including the Boys Secondary School, and there are plans for our trainees to become club chairs at their schools. They will recruit and pass the leadership to the others after they graduate. Together with GirlKind, we also created a library area for future club meetings in collaboration with the local national library. The plan is to include books on SGBV and 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 really hope that the library will be a safe space for the girls to come and learn from one another.

**Q: Finally, has the project changed the way you think about the world? Has it changed you?**

Wow, this project changed the way I think about the world absolutely! I realized how even change, no matter how small, can make a big difference. During our advocacy training, for example, the girls' aspirations were so inspiring and it was so impressive how hard they were working to achieve them. Their dedication to keep a positive outlook changed my perspective on life—it was clear to me that if I truly want change, I need to actively seek and work towards it.

*Yasmin later provided this quote as the capstone for her final report*

***“Each one, teach one” was a phrase I used to hear a lot but until recently had never fully comprehended until it became a major component of my Davis project. When I saw the secondary girls passing their knowledge to the younger girls, I realized how powerful education was and how much good could come from it.***

## Section II: Photographs

***Note: The pictures below primarily feature the boys that I was able to get, including the girl, Fauzia, in the picture. However, due to a variety of factors, most of the other girls were not comfortable being photographed. Many foreigners who come into the community, often take pictures of the community without permission, and the residents do not like that. I tried my best to fit into the community and not make them feel uncomfortable.***



*Ahmed, Issak, Musa and Abdi—who signed up from different Boys Secondary Schools—in the Boys Discussion Group.*



*Fauzia and Abdul work on a lesson plan for the primary school visit.*