

In Her Own Words

Grassroots education for Kenyan women

By Catherine Cutcher, Fulbright Scholar

The education of women has been historically neglected in Africa, and Kenya, with a staggering 60 percent illiteracy rate among adult women, reflects that reality. As men move to cities seeking employment, women often remain in rural areas to raise families and work farms, where they face a growing scarcity of resources. To respond to these challenges, Kenyan women must be educated and empowered to act. And in the absence of effective schools, popular education (i.e. community-based, informal education) may provide an answer.

Currently I am doing dissertation research in Kenya with the support of the U.S. Fulbright Scholarship Program. My research explores the popular education practices and leadership development strategies used by women's grassroots organizations in Kenya, such as the Green Belt Movement and the Vindo Multipurpose Cooperative Society. To determine how these organizations educate rural populations about environmental restoration, sustainable development and women's empowerment, I am conducting ethnographic, participatory-action research in cooperation with rural Kenyan women. I want to understand how women's organizations raise the consciousness of ordinary citizens and engage their skills in collective action.

I first came to Kenya for a study-abroad program through Kalamazoo College. My senior thesis research focused on the struggle for survival and identity among street children in Nairobi. I interviewed many young people who moved from rural areas because their families could not afford to support their basic needs. These young people face incredible obstacles in gaining access to education, employment and self-sufficiency, locking families into an intergenerational cycle of poverty.

A key strategy to empowering children is to strengthen their families and communities. Street children in Kenya are symptoms of structural problems: poverty, landlessness, unemployment, lack of education, food insecurity, environmental degradation and other factors associated with rural-to-urban migration and a struggling economy. Many organizations now provide education, employment and training to women and mothers, empowering them to gain the income necessary to support and educate their children.

From studying women's grassroots organizations, I can identify and communicate effective practices, while enhancing my own skills as an educator and activist. The knowledge and skills that I

learn in Kenya translate to my own community in rural Appalachian Ohio. In spite of the distance and differences that separate us, Kenyan women's groups have developed strategies for popular education that may be adapted to other rural communities seeking sustainable development in the twenty-first century.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Catherine Cutcher, M.A.J.A., '00, is a Ph.D. candidate in cultural studies in education and a U.S. Student Fulbright Scholar in Kenya. She also is the former assistant director of African studies at Ohio University.

“The cultural studies in education Program at Ohio University prepares students to become global citizens and educators committed to activism and social change—to ‘think globally and act locally.’”



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY CATHERINE CUTCHER

Photos of Catherine Cutcher (and her students) in Kenya