

The Girl Child Education Fund brings education, hope and comfort to orphaned girls in Africa

Geneva, Switzerland; 11 October 2022 - On 11 October 2022, we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the International Day of the Girl Child. Nurses play a key role in improving girls' access to healthcare, providing education and psychological support, and caring for their particular needs. As a female-dominated profession, nursing has always looked after its own and, to this end, the International Council of Nurses (ICN), through its Florence Nightingale International Foundation (FNIF), has been ensuring that the orphaned daughters of nurses continue their education. Today, we bring you a story from the ICN President on her visit to Eswatini to meet with some of the girls whose lives have been changed by the Girl Child Education Fund.

#IDG2022 #DayoftheGirl

By Dr Pamela Cipriano
President, International Council of Nurses

Today, Khosi Dlamini is a confident and outspoken 32 year-old with a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology. But her journey through life has been filled with tragedies and hurdles. When she was just a young girl, both her parents died, and she and her younger sister went to live with their grandparents. They did their best, but did not have the money for school fees, uniforms, transport and even sanitary pads.

Nondunduzo Dlamini, also 32, has a similar story. Her nurse mother died when she was in high school and, as the eldest of four, Nondunduzo became the head of the family. She felt that all her dreams had been shattered. Yet today she is an entrepreneur with her own business and is a mentor to other young girls.



Dr Pamela Cipriano, ICN President, with some of the GCEF girls in Eswatini

These success stories are thanks to the Girl Child Education Fund (GCEF) which was launched in 2006 in four sub-Saharan

countries: Eswatini, Kenya, Uganda and Zambia to assist the orphaned daughters of nurses like Khosi and Nondunduzo. Its aim is to support the primary and secondary schooling of the orphaned daughters of nurses, through the provision of school fees, uniforms and books. Developed and implemented by the International Council of Nurses (ICN), through its Florence Nightingale International Foundation (FNIF), the Fund works directly with ICN's member national nursing associations to ensure direct support for the education needs of girl orphans.

Since the initiation of the programme over 400 girls have been enrolled in the GCEF and 285 girls have graduated from secondary school. Currently, 77 girls are being supported through this initiative.

As President of the International Council of Nurses, I had the honour, earlier this year, to visit some of the girls in Eswatini. I was met by Tiny Dlamini, the GCEF Coordinator in Eswatini and Precious, her nurse supporter, who have both been working with incredible passion and dedication to support these girls for several years. This opportunity to meet with some of the GCEF students was an incredible window into the lives of young girls who have experienced significant loss in their lives and to learn the importance of being part of the GCEF.

During our visit, Stella de Sabata, the ICN Programme Manager, and I first met five girls, all in different schools across Eswatini. The girls were rather shy and needed to be coaxed to share their stories with us. It was nice to see them become more comfortable over our time together to tell us what they liked best about school and their friends and family.

Individually, they all expressed the sadness and struggles they sometimes experience in the loss of their parent. Each girl shared how much they appreciated being able to be at school and to be supported by their guardian, by Tiny and Precious, and the socialization that occurs as being part of the programme. One of the girls mentioned how important it was to have someone to talk with when they felt very sad or depressed. She hinted that some actually had ideas of suicide at times.



Tiny, GCEF Coordinator in Eswatini, and Khosi, a GCEF alumna, speak with President Cipriano.

“The GCEF teaches the girls to be independent and not feel sorry for themselves because they are orphans. When we meet with other girls in the programme, we can share challenges, what it is like to be an orphan and it helps to know you are not alone,” said Khosi, who continues to support and advise the younger GCEF girls.

It is clear that being part of the GCEF gives hope to each of the girls. They realise and appreciate the monetary support that makes school possible, but it is the social support and nurturing that is making the biggest difference in their outlook. They voiced great appreciation for the nurses who support them.

Many loyal GCEF donors will remember Nondunduzo from the 2009 ICN Congress in Durban, South Africa, where – at age 19 - she gave a powerful and touching account

of her life, her struggles and her dreams. At the time, she said she would like to be a manager as she didn't want others to manage her for the rest of her life. Today, having lost her accounting job during the pandemic, that dream has come true as she has started her own bakery business supported by an NGO which empowers women entrepreneurs. She says she now wants to give back.

Both Tiny and Pauline Ngala, the GCEF Coordinator in Kenya, say the job of GCEF Coordinator is very rewarding, but it isn't easy. Pauline said,

"The girls have to work hard to improve their grades in school so they can join universities or even tertiary colleges. There is a lot of counselling I have to do with these girls, and follow-up with their studies. In the past two years, with COVID-19, it was a bit difficult for me to have one-on-one meetings with the girls. I had to depend on communicating with them via the phone and making calls through the schools, the teachers and the guardians at home. It was a bit challenging and sometimes you would really want to be near the girl and tell her that life isn't that easy but the girl has to be determined to work hard in school. So it has taught me how to be patient with girls from different ethnic groups because they have different cultures. You have to have enough time. You can't just meet a girl and advise her on several things. It will take time for that girl to adjust, so I've really tried to be patient with them and I keep on calling them."

"Initially the girls are at risk in matters of education. As you support the girls, we find that when you educate a girl, you educate more than one person. For example, parents have died and they have left over six girls and it is really overwhelming for most of the families who are very poor in Kenya, and they have very bright girls. So it is my wish that the support would continue for these girls."

Tiny agrees with this,

"If you educate a girl, you are educating the nation. If you educate a girl, you are also improving the social economic status of any country, of any community, of any homestead. When their parents pass away, they are the head of the family, but when you keep on motivating them, they pick up all the bits and pieces and they climb the

Tamarah Mwalawa is 18 years old and has just started her Bachelor of Nursing Science at the School of Health Sciences of Kirinyaga University, Kenya (Kenya).

She said it was always her dream to be a nurse and take after her mother.

"I was constantly being sent home from school for school fees, which is quite common here. The GCEF helped me stay in school and finish my studies, improving my performance and securing a place in university."

I promise to work hard and achieve my objective of being in university and I am looking forward to return the great generosity I received from you. To the other girls I would just like to encourage them to stay in their studies and prioritise their education."

Pauline Ngala, Tamarah's GCEF Coordinator in Kenya spoke about why this project helps with recruiting nurses in Kenya.

"Tamarah was always talking about being a nurse and I am happy for her. If we support these girls and they go to college and train as nurses, then we are going to have people who have the will at heart to be a nurse, instead of just training people who are employed, but do not have that will; we are going to train people who know what it means to be a nurse."

ladder to where they are today. These girls are my ambassadors to the other girls. They empower them.

They are able to carry their own life in their own hands and make the decisions that they like about themselves. So it is very motivating to me."

We also had the chance to visit a school and meet one of the girls and her guardian. She is a twin so her brother joined us as they tend to do everything together. We learned about her interests in school and what her school day is like. Once again, we found a very shy young girl who appreciated being at school and who warmed up to the strangers who wanted to learn about her life.



Tiny with a GCEF girl, her twin brother and their guardian.

The focus of the GCEF is on helping orphaned girls because they are the first to lose their support of extended families for attending school, and the burden of care for sick relatives falls disproportionately on them rather than on boys.

According to UNICEFⁱ, there are 129 million girls out of school around the world. Educating girls plays a key role in improved health and poverty reduction. It leads to lower birth rates and infant mortality rates, better health, nutrition and gender equity. Girls who are educated earn higher incomes, leading to higher productivity, strengthened economies and stable, resilient societies. Unfortunately, UNESCOⁱⁱ reports that "Of the 59 million out-of-school children of primary school age, 32 million, or more than one-half, live in sub-Saharan Africa".

The girls' schooling is funded by donations from individuals, and public and private organisations, with a special focus on the global nursing community. An average of US\$ 1400 covers the annual costs of a uniform, shoes, school books, and fees for each orphaned girl.

"We are so grateful for the help", said Precious, a nurse volunteer in Eswatini. "They need the encouragement, the psychological support, even the physical support. When they see me coming, they are so happy. And it is helping me as I am learning that educating a girl child is an investment, for the family, for the nation, for everyone who comes in contact with that girl."

Thanks to your girl child programme, I was able to complete my four-year study from Butere Girls High School...securing a chance in the University of Nairobi. I greatly appreciate the support as I was able to conclude my high school studies with zero turmoil. Thank you so much. God bless you.

- Annelidya, 18 years old, Kenya

If you would like to support the orphaned daughters of nurses to ensure they have a brighter and better future, please donate to the Girl Child Education Fund via [credit card](#), [bank transfer](#) or cheque.

More information on the GCEF can be found [here](#).

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ⁱ UNICEF. *Girl's education, Gender equality in education benefits every child*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>

ⁱⁱ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2019). *New Methodology Shows that 258 Million Children, Adolescents and Youth Are Out of School*. Available at: <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/new-methodology-shows-258-million-children-adolescents-and-youth-are-out-school.pdf>