

A Chance for a Better Life: The EMEBET Education Sponsorship Program in Uganda

By Christine Harris

What if someone gave you chance for a better life? Perhaps someone walked up to you and handed you a winning lottery ticket, or an anonymous person bought you a house. What would you do or how would you feel? Four orphan girls living in the Agoro Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camp discovered the answer to these questions last year. These four orphan girls received a sponsorship to attend secondary boarding school through Working To Empower's EMEBET education sponsorship program. The girls completed primary school (through grade 7) through Uganda's universal primary education system, but could not afford the costly tuition and boarding cost to attend secondary school without the EMEBET sponsorship. How does it feel to get the once in a lifetime opportunity to go secondary school? "Amazing!" says Jennifer.

The Agoro IDP camp is not a pleasant place. It was formed for protection against the violence of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). However, the creation of the camp saw an increase in LRA violence and attacks. The dense population and poor sanitation leads to diseases such as typhoid and cholera, and increases poverty due to a lack of economic opportunity. Many adults turn to locally brewed alcohol to forget their troubles. The life of a child is equally depressing. From age 1-5 the children play in the dirt with much less parental supervision and attention than children receive in the West. At age 5 or 6 the children enter primary school in the camp. The family is required to pay a small fee to send each child to school. The classes are huge with over 100 students per teacher. Books are hard to find and teachers are severely underpaid. Girls are under-valued and are frequently prevented from attending school. They are kept home to do chores such as cooking, cutting firewood, working in the fields and carrying water. Girls are usually married before they reach 7th grade, frequently in their early teens. The high HIV prevalence rates and the LRA attacks mean that there are many orphans in the camps. The orphans are frequently treated as second class citizens and are forced to do much more work around the home. Since the status of girls is much less, if there is any money for secondary school, the families send the boys to secondary school and keep the girls at home. The end result of all these factors: the lower status of girls, the early marriage of girls, extreme poverty and orphans being treated as household servants, is that orphan girls never get the chance to attend secondary school. It is in this context that Working to Empower started the EMEBET Education sponsorship program in the Agoro IDP Camp.



Last year four orphan girls were selected and sponsors were found so that they could attend secondary school. The cost of sponsoring a child is \$20 per month which pays for tuition, boarding and food at the Kitgum Town College Secondary School. Working to Empower then contributes additional funds to pay for uniforms, books, and other supplies for these girls. This allows the girls to complete the four years of secondary school and then attend teaching or nursing college or a university.



An education really does lead to a better life. Education for girls leads to an increased income, getting the opportunity to fulfill their dreams, and no longer being dependent on men. Education of girls has been found to be associated with: increased status of women, greater awareness of individual rights, higher age of sexual debut, higher age of marriage, decreased risk of HIV infection, and an increased health

status for the woman and her entire family. Also, when women have the opportunity to become educated they serve as role models and advocates for other women and girls in the community.

The four girls who are currently studying at the secondary school want to use their education to serve the community: two want to be teachers, one wants to be a policewoman, and the other wants to be a nurse. The girls are all extremely grateful for the opportunity they have been given and they are studying hard. For example, on her school break, Jennifer spends her mornings working in the fields hoeing, but she studies in the afternoon. She cares very much about her education and she wants to do well and become a nurse.

Six more girls have been selected to receive the secondary school sponsorship for next year. After passing their entrance exams and getting sponsors, these girls will also learn what it feels like to get a chance for a better life.



Credits: Background image of the IDP camp by Logan Cochrane as well as the picture of the students on the first page.