SUCCESS STORY
Girls from Poor Families Finish School

Dormitory-like "Safe Houses" help girls complete high school

Moono Muleya, center, with her classmates at the "Safe House" boarding facility in Livingstone, Zambia.

Photo: USAID/Gerald Mwale

As boarding students, high school girls from poor families are able to concentrate on finishing school and dream of a better future.

Before moving into a Safe House for girls, Moono Muleya, 18, lived in a single-room house with her widowed mother and four siblings. The twelfth-grader at David Livingstone High School struggled to do her homework in a cramped quarter with barely enough light to read and write. Unable to cope with demands at home and school, Moono started thinking about dropping out, like so many other girls she knew. But then she was given the chance to move into a dormitory-like Safe House in Livingstone, Zambia, where she could study well, eat regular meals and learn good hygiene habits. She will graduate in 2006.

For girls like Moono, education remains a challenge in Zambia. Hurdles that limit them from finishing high school include no access to clean water and toilets, lack of money, and distance from school. Beyond that, pressure for girls to drop out increases with the onset of puberty and related problems, like harassment by male teachers and parental pressure to marry. If one or both parents die of HIV/AIDS, the burden of care for the family falls on the girls.

The Zambian education ministry and women's rights groups are working with USAID to ensure safe environments for girls to encourage them to complete school. More than 4,000 Zambian girls and boys receive help from USAID through the President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief and the Ambassador's Girls' Scholarship Program to pay for high school fees and materials.

In 2005, USAID helped the Forum for African Women Educationalists of Zambia, a women's rights group, set up the Safe House. The 19 female residents under the care of a matron learn about HIV/AIDS, adolescent health issues and life skills. This has empowered many girls, including Moono, and raised their self-esteem.

The forum has also opened Safe Houses in Kabwe and Serenje, housing 16 and 17 young girls, respectively. Moono says the opportunity to live and study at the Safe House has showed her the light at the end of the tunnel: "We are happy because we go to school and we hope for the future."