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TANZANIA

SUCCESS STORY

Science is for Girls

Science camp sparks girls' interest in science and math



Photo: USAID/Sithara Batcha

Aisha measures the width of a 200 Tshilling coin using a vernier caliper at the girls science camp in Pemba, Zanzibar.

Students go home with new hopes and fond memories, with the camp's theme song echoing in their heads: "A girl child can do what a boy child can do A girl child can do what a boy child can do If only she's given a chance!"

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At first, Pemba seems an unlikely setting for an innovative girls' education program. The lush green island off mainland Tanzania has a relaxed, traditional atmosphere. Women in headscarves stroll the unpaved roads, men sell sugarcane in dilapidated stalls, and a resonant chant calls the faithful to prayer five times a day.

Girls in Unguja and Pemba, the two islands that comprise Zanzibar, have fared poorly in education, and especially math, compared to boys. Although there is an equal ratio of boys to girls until the first years of secondary school, female enrollment falls sharply thereafter. Less than 30 percent of students pursuing higher education are female. Many girls drop out of school because of early marriage and pregnancy — half of the girls in Pemba are married by age 18 and have their first child by age 19.

But things are beginning to change with the Pemba science camp, a USAID-funded effort to encourage girls to study the sciences. A camp held in 2006, the third of its kind, hosted 140 secondary school students. Improving on the success of two earlier camps, with 40 girls each, it was expanded to host more students, including boys. Of the 140 students, 100 were girls.

During a week of intensive study, students perform experiments in biology, chemistry, and physics, many using laboratory equipment for the first time. They gather in the rain-soaked Ngezi forest to explore Pemba's remarkable flora and fauna. Girls and boys meet as equals and exchange ideas about subjects like HIV/AIDS, perceived differences between men and women, and career choices. Mentors and role models, including teachers, a person living with HIV/AIDS, a physician, and an educator hold informal consultations with the young learners throughout the camp.

The camps seem to be having the desired effect: girls who attended are now shooting for careers in science. Raya and Ziada want to become doctors, while Rukia is thinking about engineering. What about marriage? Khadija asserts, "I will get married only after I finish all my studies." Pleased with the success of the camps, Zanzibar's Minister of Education has great expectations for the future of every girl and boy in Zanzibar. He hopes to expand the camps to include primary school students and to hold science camps in every district every six months.