

# Encouraging Mafia Island's Girls to Break through the Barriers to Education

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## ActionAid Tanzania, Mafia Project

***Laila's ambition and determination to break barriers and use her education to leave her home island inspires all. Despite the obstacles, Laila's mother and other community members on the island are fighting negative norms and values to ensure the young ones get an education and avoid hindrances to child development like early forced marriages.***

Laila Abdallah Ally (14) is an ambitious girl who wants to leave Mafia Island when she grows up and move to Tanzania mainland to become a doctor. For many girls living in Mafia many of these dreams seem far-fetched. This remote island has 23 villages, 34 primary schools and 6 secondary schools, and is home to 9,552 students, 52% of whom are girls. Their parents rely on fishing, tourism and subsistence farming. Men who are the majority in the fishing sector spend few hours with their families and fail to identify the needs of their children. The food produced by most of the farmers cannot suffice the need of the families throughout the year meaning children may not be able to get enough food every day. As per traditions and cultures of Mafia communities, girls and women are affected by stereotypes and vandalism which tend to promote boys over girls in all spheres of life. Their meagre earnings coupled with strong patriarchal and cultural norms have had an adverse effect on the education of girls. Also, as an island transport is a major challenge which inhibits the exposure of the people of Mafia to alternative means towards addressing violence against children.

“It was very hard for me to attend school in the beginning,” says Laila. “Many of us would be laughed at either because of the way we dressed or if we were in our periods. I was ill affected with the tendency of my fellow children to laugh at me due to my black skin colour. I felt bad and sometimes felt attending school was a punishment rather than a promotion. I used to cry a lot but could not tell my mother about the situation. It was even worse when we were forced by our mothers and grandmothers to stay at home.”

Laila's mother, Sophia Amri (34) was married at an early age. “I did not have the chance to complete school when I was young. My parents married me off so that they could take care of my other siblings. I did not even know what it meant to be married to a man at first. Even when I got my children, it was very hard. We do not have much money to take care of all our children so it becomes difficult to do anything. At times during ceremonies, I need to take my children out of school to help with the chores and to attend events like traditional “ngomas”. There are times that Laila would try to speak to me challenging that behaviour but I thought that was rude.”

Sophia's case is not an isolated one. Many of Mafia's women face the same predicament. Her neighbor, Zuwena Ally (38 says), “our practices, norms and behaviors make it difficult for girls both here at home and in school. Even when they have problems like being chased by boys on the street, they are scared of telling us. In addition, when we get to know what is happening we fear to share the information with the elders in case our family is put to shame.”

So far 40 clubs have been established since November - 2016 and to date at least 3200 boys and girls from across Mafia have had a chance to be a part of the these bi-monthly meetings. Suggestion boxes has been introduced to 40 schools including Baleni primary school where Laila is taking her studies, as the means towards collecting children violence cases stories in a confidential manner. Media channels have been

engaged by ActionAid to broadcast and popularize children violence cases in Mafia whereby children like Laila have been given an opportunity to give out their voices towards claiming back their rights.

On Sophia and Zuwena Nyundo's part, "we were encouraged to join the Mothers groups by our neighbors because we started complaining about our girl's rights." The mother groups comprise a minimum of 30 members from 23 villages around the island. They have been trained by ActionAid on legal framework for safeguarding children rights in Mafia whereby they applied the knowledge given as a checklist towards sensitizing communities in safeguarding children rights. Signboards with different messages introduced by ActionAid in collaboration with women rights group in Mafia were placed in most populated areas for awareness and community sensitization purposes.

Mama Fatuma Kwao (52) one of the chairpersons of the group says; "At first we used to speak on our own, then we discovered that things were not changing. Our girls were still being abused at home, on their way to school and even in the classrooms. It would even be difficult for them if they were going to the Mosque. We decided to take a bold step and invite the men to attend our meetings. Eh, I must say that in the beginning they did not want to be seen with us but with time they started coming one by one. I hear that so far most of our clubs have at least 10 male members. Because of this way of working together, we agreed to report any children violation issues regardless of the relationship of the child. We also agreed with the teachers to protect children who are reporting any violence incidences either evolving from school or community level."

Using channels that ensure girls' right to free, quality, public and inclusive education is realized; while also protecting their right to safety and self-determination, Laila and her mother feel that they have a better understanding of their rights today.

"I know who to report to, and I also know what my rights are as a girl. I feel stronger because I can stand up to anyone trying to abuse me. One day when you come back to Mafia, you will find me taking care of patients at our dispensary here", she says, with a twinkle in her eye.

Sophia nods as she watches her daughter speaking and then interjects, "Since I went to the mothers' group I have also joined the Women's Rights Association in Mafia (SAWAMA). Being a part of this group has changed the way I think and plan for my children. I wish that I had been given this opportunity when I was younger."

Religious and cultural leaders have also been involved in this change process. Omary Nganju (54), a religious leader attended some of the ActionAid Mafia sensitization meetings in Mafia district which involved religious leaders, government officials and community members representatives. According to Omary Nganju "at first we did not really understand why this organization and the women were asking for change because this is our culture. We believe in the traditions that were passed down from our ancestors and we do not want to lose them. As a result, now there are fewer child marriages because we insist on couples giving us their birth certificates before we can officiate marriage. Secondly, together with the local authorities in Mafia allowed SAWAMA Members to appear in court to witness on issues related to children violence offences. Thirdly, we also agreed to teach our followers about the importance of protecting children rights. It is still not easy but we are on the right track so far. Let us see how it turns out."

The initiative taken by Baleni Primary school teachers to introduce hostel services for girls is a result of frequent engagement with ActionAid in collaboration with other district education officers on how to promote girl's rights in Mafia. Training around Promote Rights in school framework introduced by ActionAid has oriented teachers in Mafia on how to create conducive learning and teaching environments for girls as a means towards ensuring their rights.

Mafia district still has a long way to go, given the deeply entrenched belief system but through efforts such as the ActionAid Local Rights Programme (LRP), the signs are good. Dialogue on children rights issues are high on the agenda, and many of the clubs are taking lead in bringing concerns to the attention of local and national authorities. With trends like this, Laila and many of her friends might just feel compelled to remain and develop the island that they call home.