



Daughters of *the* **OFF-FORGOTTEN** **CONTINENT**

Save the Children/Michael Bisceglie

By **Patrice Gaines**

Life in Africa can be brutal for girls in the midst of an AIDS epidemic, war, poverty, and a culture that often puts a price, literally, on daughters. AAUW Educational Foundation fellows, among others, are working to improve conditions for their sisters.

Chipo Tucker is five years old. She attends kindergarten in Washington, D.C., loves peach ice cream, and vacations with her parents at the beach.

Her life started out drastically differently, an ocean away in Zimbabwe. She was abandoned just hours after birth, left under an acacia tree in the countryside. Passersby found Chipo sick, screaming, umbilical chord still attached. She was taken to an orphanage and rescued by Vita and Neely Tucker, who adopted her and brought her to the United States. Chipo was one of the fortunate.

“Girls in Zimbabwe we know who are sick usually become street children. There is no other option,” says Neely Tucker.

Far too many daughters of Africa will never attend school. Parents often abandon sick children, especially those with AIDS. When parents die from the virus, girls often become responsible for caring for their siblings and feeding the household. Other families can't afford school fees or, with limited resources, educate only boys. In countries at war, children face two problems: fighters sometimes leave their own children or abduct girls to serve as soldiers or concubines.

AIDS, political upheaval, poverty, and tradition affect African girls in a particularly harsh way. They bear the brunt of social ills because, in most regions of the continent, they are considered not much more than property. Because of tradition, girls exist on the edge of life from the time of their birth, always at the mercy of others, whether enraged men, poor parents, or the owner of the stoop on which they sleep.

In Somalia, 94 percent of girls do not attend primary school, according to a UNICEF survey. In Niger, the number is 86 percent. In at least 22 African countries, more than 40 percent of girls of primary school age do not attend school.

“Girls' education is a matter of extreme urgency. We cannot sit by and allow young girls to be robbed of their rights, of the chance to become healthier women, more productive citizens, and better informed mothers,” Carol Bellamy, UNICEF executive director, says on the organization's website.

AIDS Orphans

Since the onset of AIDS, mothers have been known to abandon babies who have the virus or appear to. AIDS also orphans millions of children, who must fend for themselves when their parents die. In eastern and southern regions of Africa, 6 million children were orphaned by AIDS from 1981 to 1998, according to UNICEF. Nearly three-quarters of children under age 15 in those regions have lost one or both parents to the disease.

The virus destroys additional lives when passed on at birth. In at least five countries, more than 25 percent of pregnant women test HIV-positive, which puts their babies at greater risk of having the virus. More than 60 percent



Photo from *Love in the Driest Season*, reprinted with permission

of the world's children infected by AIDS are on the continent of Africa.

Chipo Tucker (pictured here with her adoptive parents) was abandoned under a tree in Zimbabwe.

Second-Class Citizens

Poverty and a culture that treats women as second-class citizens also limit girls' access to education. Letty Chiwara, program specialist for the African section of UNIFEM, the women's fund of the United Nations, remembers watching her female classmates in Zimbabwe steadily drop out of school.

“I grew up in a family that didn't care about the traditional cultural issues against girls,” says Chiwara. “But I suppose in other families it was not the same. ... In many instances the girls would not be allowed to go to school because they would get married.” Unmarried girls were considered useless, says Chiwara, because they did not bring in dowry money.

“I saw girls with lots of potential failing to continue their education,” says Chiwara.

Forced Laborers

These uneducated, orphaned, or poor girls often become abused laborers.

African culture allows children to work within the family, the extended family, and often the community, but the current economic woes, compounded by HIV/AIDS, have distorted traditional forms of child work into exploitative practices, according to UNICEF.

Kenya's Ministry of Labor has identified children working in agriculture, particularly on coffee and tea plantations, as one of the



Rachel Wesseh, 15, a bodyguard to a Liberian rebel general, holds her doll at rebel headquarters in Liberia. Watching is her self-described boyfriend.

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country's great national concerns. Some 17,000 children were engaged in employment on various plantations between 1995 and 1998, according to UNICEF, in violation of national labor laws.

In the absence of clear employment criteria, most of these children, especially the girls, are hired after providing sexual favors to the plantation managers. And farm supervisors reportedly take advantage of the prevailing poverty to have sexual relations with employees' daughters in exchange for money, food, or even school fees.

Other children head to urban areas where, they believe, increasing industrialization means more jobs. With little or no education, girls have difficulty finding good-paying jobs. To feed themselves and their families, many work as domestic servants.

For others, the only alternatives are prostitution and drugs. As tourism has increased, so has child prostitution. In cities in Kenya—Mombasa, Malindi, and Nairobi—girls are kept in brothels alongside adult prostitutes; brothels that deal mainly with female children are coded “Bar and Restaurant.” In some regions, local and foreign guides direct tourists to children who work in the sex trade. In South Africa, children involved in commercial sex operate on the streets, in hotels, and in sex clubs in major cities such as Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Durban.

In Mombasa, a Roman Catholic nun started SOLWODI, Solidarity With Women in Distress, a program that offers girls an alternative to prostitution. The program was the basis of a case study presented at the Second World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in 2001.

The report follows 16-year-old Caroline, who left home and school in Nakuru and traveled about 800 kilometers by train to Mombasa. As Caroline got off the train, a woman approached her and invited her home. The girl, who knew no one in Mombasa, gladly accepted. She soon found herself being trained to work in the sex trade in clubs.

“Some of the men would beat me, especially when I refused to take drugs or I insisted on using a condom,” said Caroline.

An older girl told her about SOLWODI, where girls 25 and younger can get vocational training in skills such as tie-dyeing, baking, and hairdressing. Caroline chose hairdressing.

Child Soldiers

In countries in conflict, such as the Sudan, Liberia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, young victims—children as young as age 8—become soldiers. Some are sent by their parents; others are abducted or join for their own protection.

“A lot of them are young women, and they were basically used as sex slaves,” says Vita Tucker, who is now project coordinator for East Africa for World Vision US. Girls can also serve as combatants, cooks, porters, and messengers.

Vita Tucker regularly visits the Children of War Center run by World Vision in Uganda. “This is a camp that does psycho-social treatment with young victims who have been abducted from their homes and used as child soldiers in the Sudan,” she says. “When the soldiers let them go, they come to the center.” Because of the social stigma of rape, says Susan Shepler, an AAUW Educational Foundation fellow who conducts research on the reintegration of child soldiers in Sierra Leone, “Girls slink home anonymously (with their pregnancy or their baby) and try to keep the whole thing quiet.”

One reason young women are abducted, abused, and misused is they don't have the advantage of parents and extended families, according to Vita Tucker. “AIDS has killed the extended family, once the very root of Africa.”

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Daughters

Because of cultural practices and poverty, even the family may not provide a safe haven for girls. In some pastoral communities, parents marry off their girls, starting at age 6, in exchange for livestock. In Kenya, parents have paid for their sons' school fees by selling their daughters into marriage with older men.

In forced marriage and other situations, older men increasingly search for younger girls, trying to find virgins who will not infect them with the AIDS virus or who, the men mistakenly believe, will cure them of the virus.

Meanwhile, in many regions of Africa, families subject their daughters to genital mutilation. Again, the reasoning is economic. The practice has no religious basis but is done to preserve virginity, ensure marriageability, and contain sexuality. Approximately 2 million girls are mutilated every year. Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, and the Sudan account for 75 percent of all cases. In Djibouti and Somalia, 98 percent of the girls are mutilated. Besides traumatizing the victims, mutilation can cause prolonged bleeding, infection, infertility, and death.

Working for African Girls

This might have been little Chipó's fate had it not been for the Tuckers. While Neely Tucker, a journalist, was in Africa on assignment, the couple volunteered at the orphanage. One morning Vita arrived to find a new baby: Chipó.

When she discovered the baby had a blistering fever, she rushed her to the hospital. It took months, but the Tuckers nursed Chipó back to health, surmounted governmental challenges, and returned to the United States with their new baby girl.

Last September, while babies died in the dry heat of Africa and girls grew up with no hope for a safe and rewarding future, Chipó swam underwater the entire length of a swimming pool. Her proud father watched in amazement.

The irony is not lost on her parents. They continue to work for Africa's children. ☐

Patrice Gaines, a former Washington Post reporter, is an author and journalist who lives in Maryland. Neely Tucker's book about Chipó's adoption, Love in the Driest Season, will be published in early 2004.

A Quiz You Can't Fail

True or false? With an AAUW gift annuity...

- 1 No matter how the economy fares, you receive the **same annuity income** year after year.
- 2 The older you are when you establish your annuity, the **higher** your payment rate.
- 3 Typically part of your annuity income is **tax free**.
- 4 In most instances, you receive a **tax deduction** when you establish an annuity.
- 5 You can **leave a legacy** by establishing an annuity supporting the AAUW Educational Foundation, Legal Advocacy Fund, or Association Leadership and Training Institute.

It's all true. With an AAUW gift annuity, you can't fail.

To determine your potential tax deduction and annual income, contact Gloria Benton at 202/728-7627 or development@aauw.org.

Age	Payment Rates*
65	6.0%
70	6.5%
75	7.1%
80	8.0%
85	9.5%
90+	11.3%

*(one-life, subject to change)



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