



# ***Exercising Women's Leadership That Transforms Communities***

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AFRICAN WOMEN'S  
DEVELOPMENT FUND



## Young Women's Leadership & Akili Dada

*“Akili Dada has made me, me. It has made me bring out my abilities. I have courage. I have a voice. I could not speak to you the way I am speaking now. But Vero (former Akili Dada staff) would say to me... ‘Sharon speak up, I know you have it in you.’ At first I was doing it for Vero. But now I speak up because it makes me feel good.”*

**-Sharon**

In today's world, women's leadership in both the public and private sector is imperative. In Kenya, this is a fact acknowledged in law and government policy, including in the country's Constitution. The reality is a far cry from the spirit and letter of the law. National discussions on the matter are fraught with controversy, with the majority view that the playing field is already equal for women. The statistics suggest otherwise. Less than 30% of women occupy decision making spaces in the political arena at the national level of government. Less than 10% of women in senior decision making positions in corporate Kenya are women. Research conducted indicates that these numbers can directly be attributed to systemic inequalities that took root during the colonial era. These include a lack of access to quality education, inadequate access to financial resources and limited networks that women (particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds) can tap into to gain access into decision making spaces.

Akili Dada was established in 2001 by Dr. Wanjiru Kamau-Rutenberg to address this situation. Informed by African feminist principles, the institution's approach ensures girls and young women from resource-strapped environments become transformative leaders. They do so by ensuring experiences for young women to develop a sense of pride in themselves and where they come from. The organisation provides access for young women to a comprehensive, high-quality education. Participants are mentored by and build networks with phenomenal women in diverse public and private sectors, on the basis of their interests and unique leadership styles.

# Milestones: AWDF Grant to Akili Dada

## 52

Akili Dada scholars participated in 2 leadership academies in

**August 2016 & March 2017.**



Increase in the number of girls speaking up at the academy and at school including participating in group work and inter-dorms competition activities.

More girls taking up leadership positions in schools and their communities.



## 54%

of our scholars had at least one position of leadership, an increase from

## 48% in 2015



## 100%

of scholars targeted engaged in social change projects at the community level.



Mentorship gave Akili Dada scholars access to an extensive network of devoted young women mentors drawn from a wide range of professional sectors.



Created spaces where girls and young women could engage in creative, diverse and dynamic social learnings. These spaces are critical to motivate, empower, and enable young women to declare their life mission and impact their varied communities positively.

In 2016, mentoring sessions were held in



## 10 schools

in **6 counties** across Kenya focused on equipping girls with the necessary skills to build leadership through different platforms of expression.

Akili Dada girls interacted with



## 40 professional

women from Minerva University, AWARD, IBM, Oracle, Strathmore University, USIU and Kenyatta University.

In 2016, scholars implemented social change initiatives which directly impacted

# 1,725



community members and indirectly impacted

# 4,765



community members

Mentorship programmes reached an average of

# 12,820



adolescent girls in 2016. The same focused on skills building, creating awareness on mainstream and emerging careers, creating and educating on opportunities available in STEAM (Science Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics).



*“Someone spoke about courage and it encouraged me to the point where it helped me be confident. This was my journey to start being confident. The sisterhood is constant. I know what I want from life. I want to be happy in life. And I can do that to help people when I become a cardiologist.”*

**-Mary**

# In Their Own Words: Change Realised in Partnership with AWDF

**Participants of Akili Dada working with the AWDF project shared the following reflections on how their lives have changed for the better, as a result of engagement with the fund.**

## Building Self Esteem

"I now have confidence and I know my own self worth. By the time I received a scholarship from Akili Dada when I was in Form 2, I had already applied for almost seven scholarships. I was always rejected and I felt down. I had lost hope by the time I was applying to Akili Dada. To be honest, I wasn't prepared when they picked me. I was so happy that finally others could see what was in me. The leadership academies have given me confidence. I have also come to realise that confidence does not start from a big place. You can start small, like talking to the whole class. I got the courage and I stood up in class to use the skills I learnt at the leadership academy. After that, I became the chemistry driver (i.e., takes leadership in setting the stage for conversations with her classmates, before a chemistry lesson). On my community service project, I took the initiative and went to speak to the administration at a children's home in my community about what I could do to help. This is not something I would have done before. When my mum saw what

*I have achieved in community service, she also got inspired to start her own community service work. So I believe I have had an impact."*

**-June Wambui**

*"I had such low self esteem. Now I don't care what people think. I had a challenge where I could not ask questions. Now Sharon will tell you that I always ask questions in class."*

**-Mutheu**

## Nurturing a Cohort of Self Aware Leaders

*"I joined Akili Dada when I was in Form 1 and I am now a gap year scholar. I was very quiet and even took my desk to sit at the corner in class. I felt I did not belong. I felt others were better than me. After the first leadership academy, I was taught self confidence. I was socialising and talking to people. I had fun learning from my sisters because I could relate to their experiences... there is real sisterhood. Having friends who build you is very important. I have met many role models through Akili Dada. I admire what they do and how they speak and I feel compelled to do something great. Until I joined Akili Dada, I did not even think I was a leader. I took a step to be a prefect in my dorm. Under my leadership, my house was*

*ranked the best in sports and academics. I have come to learn that when you touch something, you must leave it better than you found it. I was always hiding what I could do but now I can show the world what I can do... No more hiding!"*

**-Bernadette**

*"Sometimes you think you can be a leader. But you're like 'hizo niza akina Sharon' (i.e., that is for the likes of Sharon). Through mentorship as an Akili Dada scholar, I have learnt about courage. I have also learnt about emotional intelligence and how I can handle my emotions better. Before, I would always ask myself, 'Can I do it? Let someone else do it...' I got the 'can-do-it' mentality from Akili Dada. I am now the Chairlady of the Students Campaign Against Drugs. Through the career symposiums, I have come to know what career path I want to pursue. I read Ben Carson's book and I thought I wanted to be a neurosurgeon but I actually hate the sight of blood. Through symposium, I was able to know that I want to be a lawyer because I like to speak a lot and I am good at debating. As for Community Service, people in my community always discourage me and show me I am doing nothing. But I have said it's okay, I will continue even if no one helps me."*

**-Yvonne**



## Building Leaders with an Eye for Community Change & Transformation

*"It has been three years since I have been an Akili Dada scholar. Before I got the scholarship, it was tough because my parents could not afford my school fees. I can't really explain how I felt when I got the scholarship because I thought it was a normal scholarship where they pay your school fees and do shopping for you. At my first leadership academy, I was very shy because there were so many girls.*

*I learnt about rights and also got to meet Dorothy (a staff member at Google-Kenya). She was so audible! So I also decided to see if I could try to do the same. Here at school, students get picked to motivate everyone based on the theme of the week. I was picked. It went well. Everytime an Akili Dada scholar is picked we get merited (a point-based system*

*that recognises students for positive contributions made). It is because we use the skills we learnt at the leadership academies. I also started looking at myself in a different way. Through the community service project, I identified that the problem in my community was drinking. I decided to do a write up on its effects and I wanted to distribute it. My mum discouraged me but I went ahead and tried it. I did not see any impact. Then I thought to myself, 'Why don't I choose something with impact?' I started teaching girls in my community some of the skills learnt through Akili Dada on sexual and reproductive rights (SRHR) and public speaking. It is really popular with the girls and in high demand.*

*Akili Dada makes me think beyond what I see. One time, I pictured a situation when I was in primary school. I remembered how I struggled with school fees. I decided that I wanted to pay for someone's fees. My mum dismissed me and said I crazy. How do you pay for someone's fees when yours are being paid for? One of the Akili Dada sisters taught me how to make*

*soap which I sold and I was able to pay the school fees of a girl I identified in the primary school I attended. I am helping her the way someone helped me. I have spoken to my classmates and through them I have spoken to different parents to see how they can support me in this. Soon, I will add more candidates to my list.*

**-Sharon**

## Encouraging Sisterhood in Young Women

*"What I will always remember about Akili Dada is the sisterhood. Some people like me come from backgrounds where no one appreciates you. At Akili Dada, I know I am loved and I am worth something.*

**-Mutheu**





## We Take Pride In...

**Akili Dada staff shared the following insights on what aspects of the AWDF partnership they are most proud of:**

*"We have improved our ability to engage skills-based mentoring and in that way, the mentorship we offered was more structured. We are learning that the girls and individual staff have room for innovation. For example, we have had sessions on women in STEM and used art for advocacy to address cases of sexual and domestic violence that the girls bring to our attention. We will also be finalising discussions on how to better utilise our mentors. Currently, we have 2,000 members. Not all of them are active. We are thinking through ideas to make mentors more invested in Akili Dada including being clear about what we want from them and how we as an institution can add value to their lives."*

**-Joyce Ngumba,  
Director-Innovation in Leadership,  
Akili Dada**

*'Because of AWDF's reputation as a solid pan-African women's fund, getting a grant from them has added to the credibility of our institution.'*

*"Scholars supported are gaining global recognition for their efforts. We had a scholar called Cynthia. She lived with her grandparents in a remote part of Kenya. She was the only person in her community in a 40 kilometer radius to have gone to a national school. Her home is so far it takes you one and a half days to get there. Her grandfather is a tea farmer. He would borrow 2000 KES to travel all the way to Nairobi to ask her school if they could wait for him to get his tea money so that he could pay her school fees. By the time we got to know about Cynthia, she had been home for two months and her grades the last time she was in school, was an E. She graduated from high school and is now at Ashesi University in Ghana. I can assure you, she is not sitting at the back of the class. She is a Melton Fellow which is a big deal. One of our donors profiled her and Cheryl Sandberg got to hear about her journey. Cheryl has released a new book and Cynthia's story of resilience has been profiled."*

**-Purity Kagwiria,  
Executive Director,  
Akili Dada**

## The Invisible Hand That Holds, Hopes, Loves, Provides and Encourages

**Cynthia, 21, is an alumna of Akili Dada and currently a student at Ashesi University. She discusses her journey below.**

*"Gender equality has been a topic of discussion for a very long time now. There are so many organisations that have really dived deeper into the issues of creating a more gender-balanced society and one of them is Akili Dada. I speak of this from a project participant point of view. This is not to decorate the organisation but to truly say what it does and how it has made my life better. Akili Dada came into my life at a very crucial moment. I was on the verge of losing my education and if someone came and told me at that point that I would be*

typing this text while seated in a lecture hall in one of the best universities and one of the only liberal arts colleges in Africa, away from my country, I would really laugh at them or even insult them. Think of a visible hand that holds, hopes, loves, provides and encourages and this is exactly what Akili Dada does.

Akili Dada has helped me grow as an individual and all the successes that I have gotten so far, I really attribute to them. I come from a small village on the western side of Kenya in a place called Kamimeji and one thing Akili Dada taught me is leadership. They taught me not the kind of leadership where you command others to act but the kind where you go down to people's level and act together. Truly, it is this that encouraged me to act. At the age of 19, I launched my project, Life Lifters, which was and is still instrumental to empowering other girls to value education. Through my organisation, I was able to reach out to 137 girls whom I encouraged to focus on their education.

I started campaigns concerning gender inequality even before I joined university

and this has not stopped even at the level that I am now. At Ashesi University, I have learnt a lot about what happens in other African countries and how different genders are treated in many other countries, and the truth is, we still have a lot to do. Talking about these issues is important but the most viable solution is putting in place mechanisms that help women grow and develop. Some mechanisms have already been put in place like Akili Dada which taught me to stand in for a course. A course that will support gender equality and that is how I got to be a fellow of a global organisation called Melton Foundation. Through this fellowship, I have a chance to interact with people from very diverse backgrounds and countries and together we have great discussions about global issues while travelling the world and meeting new people. This is a chance I wouldn't have gotten if Wanjiru Rutenberg did not take that courageous step of selecting me to be a scholar."

**-Cynthia**



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