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Weaving a Web of Support for Widows Worldwide



Women of the Well

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In April of 2006, I spent a week in Kenya documenting the work of Group of Women in Agriculture-Kochieng Ministries (GWAKO) in the rural areas surrounding Kisumu, Kenya.

I am American author/photographer working on a book about local groups in 15 countries who are helping families with the difficult problems they face. Like GWAKO, the organizations that will be featured in the book are grantees of the Global Fund for Women and the book will be published in 2007 to commemorate GFW's twentieth anniversary.

One entire chapter in the book will be devoted to GWAKO, so my week was spent doing research, interviewing management, staff, members of eight water groups, principals and students in three beneficiary schools plus one participant in their water-for-credit program.

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I was shocked to learn from the water group members how difficult life had been for them before they had access to water. Typically, a woman told how she and her daughters awakened every morning at 3AM, walking “among hippos and snakes” to fill their jerry cans—sometimes from roadside puddles, sometimes from rice paddies. They returned at 10AM, so long after school had started that the daughters could never attend. They boiled the water they had collected before they could use it (“because there were worms in it.”)

Women told me they could not build houses without water to make mud for the daub and wattle construction. I visited a school that had no water so its broken mud-walls could not be repaired; the desks stood open to the elements; the building had been condemned—yet classes continued inside.



GWAKO distributed sanitary products to the girls in the health club at this school and I watched the adolescent girls dance and sing gospel hymns to celebrate: this was a reaction I would never have imagined. But without running water and without sanitary protection, girls who got their periods had no option but to stay home; after a

few months of missing school for a week, they simply dropped out.

A group of widowed grandmothers in their eighties, are now caregivers—each for as many as a dozen grandchildren who have been orphaned by Aids. They told me they simply were not physically able to haul the water they needed to make kuon, their staple food. Without water, their animals were dying; their vegetables were not growing. They worried about how they could possibly care for the children who, “after the funerals, just run to us.”

As soon as a well is drilled, life changes. I left Kenya convinced that wells do not just provide water, they save lives. I attended the dedication of a new well and was not surprised to hear prayers and songs of thanksgiving from the whole community. What I did not expect was singing and dancing around the long-standing wells when club members continue to celebrate their access to water. “Water is life,” someone had written in chalk on a water storage container at one

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of the schools.

Comments or inquiries about this story?

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