

Chess centre in Kampala slum prepares children to make their move

By Alon Mwesigwa, The Guardian on 10.04.16

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Eighteen-year-old Phiona Mutesi (left) plays a game of chess with her colleagues at the chess academy in Kibuye, Kampala, on January 26, 2015. Photo: ISAAC KASAMANI/AFP/Getty Images

Sisters Stellah Babirye and Joan Nakimuli sit either side of a chessboard on a wooden bench at their home in Katwe, one of the largest slums in Uganda's capital, Kampala.

Babirye, 16, wants to be a politician; Nakimuli, 18, a lawyer. They gaze at the chessboard intently. Nakimuli moves her king – but it's a wrong move. Babirye captures her sister's piece and both burst into laughter. "I told you a politician is bigger than a lawyer," Babirye says.

The sisters learned to play chess at Katwe chess academy, one of five centres around Kampala that teach the game to young people.

Uganda's thriving chess scene is the focus of a new Disney film about Phiona Mutesi, a girl from the slums who went on to become perhaps the country's top female chess player, nicknamed the Queen of Katwe. The film opened in the US in September and comes out in Uganda this month.

Mutesi learned and played her first game at the Katwe chess academy, having wandered into the centre at the age of nine, following her brother in search of a meal. She was fascinated by the beauty of the chess pieces, and by the concentration on the children's faces as they played. That initial encounter led her to become entranced with the game, and she went on to become the women's junior champion of Uganda three times. In 2012, at the 40th chess Olympiad, Mutesi was named Woman Candidate Master, one of the country's first female players to win such a title.

With money earned from championships, Mutesi has moved her family out of the slums and into a new home, leaving behind the unmarked two-room building on a dirt road where she learned her skills.

At the academy, the chessboards are balanced on wobbly wooden benches and everyone observes the unwritten rule that if someone loses a game, they give way to another player. The centre is supported by a US-based charity, Sports Outreach Ministry. Most of the children who play chess at its centres are unable to pay for their education, so the organisation sends them to formal schools.

Robert Katende, the academy's founder, says it gives young people the chance of a new life. Unesco estimates that 68% of children in Uganda drop out of school before the end of their primary education; the academy's focus is on keeping young people in education and away from early marriage.

Katende, an engineer by training, played chess as a student, and thought that it would be a great way to keep young people engaged. He found a place in Katwe where the children could meet daily to play, and started up the academy. It began with five children, but the number has since swelled to more than 300. Aged between five and 23, the chess players gather daily across five separate slum locations around the capital.

The academy opens in the afternoon and any young person can drop in for a game. Katende hires experienced chess players to teach, alongside older boys and girls from the academy who also provide coaching.

Chess helps young people to focus on decision-making, says Katende. "A bad move in chess means you will lose. That is the same with life. You must think through your options before you make a move. Chess stimulates the mind; we have kids who are very good at mathematics and it may be because of chess."

Many schools across Uganda are embracing the game, he says. "I organised seminars last year to find certified instructors."

Children at the academy are taught to be humble, respect others and work hard, says Katende, adding that the children are expected to attend church on Sundays because it "does a lot to impart [good] social morals among the children."

For many children, chess has become a means of survival. At least 61 students – in primary and secondary education as well as at university – are receiving support from the academy in the form of tuition, books and other school needs. The academy also provides

lunch for those who come to play and a place to sleep for those with nowhere to live. Their lot contrasts markedly with that of other children in the slum, many of whom see education as a luxury and drop out of primary school.

“Chess is like a connection,” says Mutesi’s brother, Brian Mugabi, who is in the final year of a diploma in electrical engineering. “You play, get tuition and food. Once you have completed school, the world is open for you. I lived in a house where whenever it rained, water would flood our house. At chess, we sleep in the house where water does not flood our bed.”

Richard Kato, 17, has been playing chess for nine years now. “At first, we were playing soccer, but those who played chess got food as well, they were disciplined and went to school. I started playing; now I go to school.”

Together with their mother, Babirye and Nakimuli are among those who sleep at the academy, which also pays their tuition and helps with other education costs. Babirye is now in the second year of a nearby secondary school, while Nakimuli is in the year above.

Both realise they are lucky. About 10 years ago, they watched their older sister’s dreams fade away when she was married off at 15. Roughly 46% of girls marry before the legal age of 18 in Uganda.

“Children of my age have two children or more,” says Nakimuli. “I look forward to building a house for my mother when I finish school,” she says.

To children playing chess in Kampala slums, Mutesi’s success is a source of motivation to keep their dreams alive. “She is inspirational,” says Babirye. “I too can make it.”

Babirye and Nakimuli can now dare to dream. With an education, the possibility of becoming a lawyer or a politician could be within their grasp.

Quiz

1 Which of the following statements accurately represents the relationship between the article's central ideas?

- (A) Sisters Stellan Babirye and Joan Nakimuli are students at Katwe chess academy; in order to play chess, they had to leave their home in Katwe, one of the largest slums in Uganda's capital, Kampala.
- (B) Sisters Stellan Babirye and Joan Nakimuli are students at Katwe chess academy; they began attending because they want to learn to become a politician and a lawyer.
- (C) The Katwe chess academy tries to help its students reach their goals for a better life; a new movie follows Phiona Mutesi, one such student who has become a chess champion and an inspiration to many.
- (D) The Katwe chess academy tries to help its students reach their goals for a better life; the center is supported financially by a US-based charity called Sports Reach Ministry.

2 Read the following sentence from the article.

Roughly 46 percent of girls marry before the legal age of 18 in Uganda.

Does this sentence support a CENTRAL idea of the article? Why or why not?

- (A) Yes, it demonstrates one reason why the center is trying to keep children in school.
- (B) Yes, it demonstrates how early marriage can limit the life options for young girls.
- (C) No, it does not have any bearing on the goals of the Katwe chess centre.
- (D) No, it does not have any bearing on the life of Phiona Mutesi.

3 Read the following sentence from the article.

It began with five children, but the number has since swelled to more than 300.

What does the verb "swelled" convey in the sentence?

- (A) a sense of the unmanageable number of students at the center
- (B) a sense of the growing excitement and popularity of the center
- (C) a sense of anticipation for the upcoming Disney movie
- (D) a sense of the joy of the students who attend the center

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Which selection from the article demonstrates the meaning of the phrase "means of survival" as used in the following sentence from the article?

For many children, chess has become a means of survival.

- (A) "That is the same with life. You must think through your options before you make a move. Chess stimulates the mind; we have kids who are very good at mathematics and it may be because of chess."
- (B) Children at the academy are taught to be humble, respect others and work hard, says Katende, adding that the children are expected to attend church on Sundays because it "does a lot to impart [good] social morals among the children."
- (C) "You play, get tuition and food. Once you have completed school, the world is open for you. I lived in a house where whenever it rained, water would flood our house. At chess, we sleep in the house where water does not flood our bed."
- (D) Babirye and Nakimuli can now dare to dream. With an education, the possibility of becoming a lawyer or a politician could be within their grasp.