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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## When Water Comes to You

CrossFit-funded collection systems are freeing Kenyan women from the burden of transporting water, allowing them to pursue education and take important steps toward equality. Marty Cej reports.

By Marty Cej

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

Their ambitions are the same as those of kids everywhere, but the opportunities in the Kasemeni Division of eastern Kenya are very different.

Across this 250-square-mile region, small villages of mud-walled huts and thatched roofs cluster in shallow green valleys and atop bald red clay hills that look east to the brown haze of the port city of Mombasa and the blue water of the Indian Ocean beyond.

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Small patches of farmland are carved from the dense clay along the hillsides using a short, wide-bladed hoe called a *jembe*. The length of the handmade tool forces the workers to bend from the waist from sun-up to sundown as they swing and turn the soil. But years of experience, skill and strength allow the farmer to plant acres of corn in a day, often with a baby on her hip.

And if that baby happens to be a girl, odds are she, too, will be scratching at the earth with an Iron Age tool with a child on her own hip before she is 18. In this part of Kenya, the children are many, the schools are few, and too many ambitions, especially those of young girls, are thwarted at too young an age.

CrossFit and CrossFit affiliates have decided to take some of the burden from the backs of those who have carried it too long. Education, nutrition and clean water are this community's biggest challenges. Now, they are CrossFit's greatest responsibility.

"This is all about women," says Greg Glassman, Founder and CEO of CrossFit Inc. "Every little girl is as important as every little boy. This is CrossFit making a stand for women's rights."

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In this part of Kenya, girls start working at three and four years of age, when they begin babysitting younger siblings and accompanying their mothers, aunts and other female relatives back and forth to water sources where they scoop foul water into plastic buckets that weigh 55 lb. when full. The buckets are lifted smoothly from the muddy ground to the knee and then overhead, to be placed gently onto the folds of a scarf coiled into a flimsy cushion at the crown of the head. The women will square their shoulders, adjust their postures, and stride up the rocky path from the water hole with their hands at their sides as elegantly as a skater gliding across a frozen lake.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

***In Kenya, women have few options beyond farming, but CrossFit is hoping to change that.***

During the dry season, many of these women and girls must make the trip twice a day, a journey of up to four miles each way.

But in the village of Peku, a concrete cistern that will hold 35,000 liters of water has been built by CrossFit Brand X, CrossFit Kirkwood and Dallin Frampton's band, The Savage Hurricanes. Frampton is the young man who first approached Coach Glassman with the idea of getting CrossFit to make a difference in Kenya. The cistern will provide 60 schoolchildren half a liter a day for four months. The rainwater spills into the tank from the school's roof gutters, and a single crushing downpour during the season of the big rains can fill the entire cistern in an hour.

It will be the cleanest water the kids of this village have ever known, and it will free the women and girls from hours of portage and open up a lifetime of opportunity.





***With so much time spent transporting water, girls have no time to get an education. A cistern would change that.***

"We build a classroom with a roof and then a cistern that will hold 40,000 litres of rainwater, which will get most of the kids through the dry season," Glassman explains. "Build two cisterns and it's the whole village. The time women spend carrying water to and from the waterholes disappears. This is about liberating women from the portage of water. Once we get women out of the water business, we get a civilization."

To be sure, at waterholes all over the district, the same scene is played out twice a day: grandmothers, mothers, sisters and daughters collect water. It's hard work, yet the women are skilled and efficient, and these few minutes are also spent renewing the bonds of community, sharing stories and news, joys and grief. The women are bound to one another in their work, their challenges and their shared responsibilities, but for generations they have also been bound to a destiny where daughters can do nothing but follow the path of their mothers and grandmothers until they, too, are mothers and grandmothers.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) points out that gender equality is a prerequisite to economic development and prosperity, and that while gender equality is,

first and foremost, a human right, empowering women through education is a key to breaking the cycle of poverty.

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"When mothers are educated and families are smaller, the likelihood that all children will go to school increases. Thus, a woman's education has intergenerational ripple effects," the UNFPA explains. "Also, families with fewer children, and children spaced further apart, can afford to invest more in each child's education. This has a special benefit for girls, whose education may have a lower priority for families than that of boys."

But hardship in these small villages has never been an impediment to joy, and hard work is often the starting point for it. With hard work, and a helping hand, new paths are being broken.

Before CrossFit arrived, the students near the village of Dzendereni sat on the dirt floor of a mud-walled classroom, using their thighs as desks and hoping the rains held off until class was over. But change, like the weather, can come fast in this part of Africa. It was 10 months from the first conversation between Frampton and Glassman to children settling down in a new schoolroom in new desks with CrossFit logos on them. Enrollment has climbed and test scores have soared as brick walls, practical desks and new blackboards keep kids focused and motivated.

"The parents just wanted their children to remain home because of the uncondusive (sic) environment for learning," says Seif Mwachanyika, the new Dzendereni school's principal. "Before the coming of CrossFit, the enrollment was standing at 114. The enrollment is now standing at 395."

And the girls are thriving, which is a good thing not just for the small villages that dot this eastern coast province but also the entire country.

According to the Organization for Economic Coordination and Development (OECD), gender inequality is a both a major cause and effect of hunger and poverty in developing nations. The OECD estimates that 60 percent of chronically hungry people are women and girls, and countries with the highest levels of hunger also have high levels of gender inequality. But women and girls are also the linchpin in any program to overcome hunger, malnutrition and poverty.

The most disheartening fact is that while women and girls form the backbone of smallhold farms and are the main food producers in most developing nations, they traditionally have less access than men to opportunities, resources, local services and social protection. Fewer girls go to school and fewer girls stay.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

*In Africa, education can literally add years to a person's life expectancy and open a host of new avenues of opportunity.*





***Given food, water and education, these children will have a chance to break tradition by avoiding the fields and creating new lives for themselves.***

In the area around Dzendereni, the top students five years ago used to be all male. Now those places are more regularly occupied by women, and in one school, you would have to head to 11th place to find the first male scholar. The result is a new form of equality that's never been seen in the region.

Land is still divided and passed on to male heirs. A husband's occupation might be farm laborer, small shopkeeper or perhaps even migrant worker. Women are the main caregivers and laborers and, as mothers, responsible for the reproduction of labor. But things change when a young girl goes away to school and returns as an educated woman.

"Education changes life for everyone in the community," says Mishi Matano, the head teacher at a school in Majengo that was built by CrossFit Norcal. "They take it home to their villages."

Not only is Matano a teacher, but she is also the owner of a tree farm and a turkey farm and the mother of several children.

But if education is the foundation for a better future, then water, nutrition and sanitary living conditions are the mortar and bricks. CrossFit contributions have stretched miles to the west end of this district to halt a sanitary disaster in the village of Bofu, where shoddy construction led to the collapse of a latrine that serves 700 children. A new latrine with brick walls, a solid roof and plenty of privacy has already been built. And this, too, will have a long-term impact on the lives of women and girls.

"Investments in clean water, sanitation, time-saving technologies and skills training can improve sustainable resource management, food security, nutrition and health," the UNFPA explains. "It can also reduce the time spent on collecting water and firewood, releasing girls and women for educational and other productive activities."

### Hope for Kenya

A baby was born in the clinic in Myenzi in early November, but the mother wasn't from there. She walked six miles to give birth, and 12 hours later she walked six miles back. Luvuno Rama, who is 22 years old, never went to school but is determined that her new son, Hamisi, will.

And because a few friends at CrossFit Marina have decided to bond over some barbells and a barbecue, they will, in turn, be bound to a multitude of children breaking a new trail to university by first stepping through the doors of a school the fundraising efforts helped build.

One of those children will be Luvuno's son Hamisi. And by the time he's old enough to start school, he had better be ready to work, because two of the other babies born in Myenzi that night were girls.

*For more information about Hope for Kenya and the fundraising workout on Feb. 16, 2013, visit [Kenya.CrossFit.com](http://Kenya.CrossFit.com).*



### About the Author

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