

Making child protection systems work better

Lessons from the Girl Power Programme 2011–2015



Girl Power Alliance



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ALMMAZ IS A 17-year-old girl in a small village in Ethiopia. Her parents died of AIDS several years ago, and she looks after her three younger brothers and sisters. To make ends meet, she started going out with different men. Her neighbours came to realise this, and labelled her as a prostitute.

One night a drunken neighbour forced himself on her: “after all, she was a ‘loose woman’”. Some time later, she found she was pregnant, and she had to drop out of school. Her friends and the other villagers ostracised her. But what could she do? She had no one to turn to.

Protecting children

Almaz is not alone. She is one of many girls and young women around the world subject of violence, abuse and exploitation. Preventing and responding to such cases is the task of a **child protection system**.

Such systems consist of various organisations and individuals (the particular combination varies from place to place): the social-welfare department, special units of the police force, the judiciary, school counsellors and specially trained teachers, doctors and nurses, help-lines that girls (or their friends and neighbours) can call, and specialist organisations, often NGOs, that provide legal and psychosocial assistance.



A citizens' forum in Banke district, Nepal, discussing how to protect children in the district

Key messages

Governments are obliged under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to protect children against abuse, exploitation and violence. They must take the lead in doing so.

Child protection systems must be given the funding, institutions and human resources they need. Laws and policies to protect children must be developed and enforced.

Better coordination is needed among the various branches of government and with non-governmental and community organisations.

Child protection systems generally focus on responding to abuse after it has happened. More emphasis is needed on **preventing abuse** and eliminating its root causes.

Monitoring must cover the incidence of abuse and the responses of the health services, police, justice and other elements of the child protection system. The data must be made open to ensure accountability.

Informal systems play a key role in protecting children. Governments and non-governmental organisations should take these systems into account, build on their positive aspects, and seek to change social norms where these are harmful. Enhancing the capacity of communities, families and children to prevent and respond to abuse must be central.

Non-governmental organisations can play a key role in raising awareness, changing social norms and influencing policy to establish effective child protection systems.

Parents, families, friends and neighbours are central: they can ensure that abuse is socially unacceptable, help girls avoid problems before they occur, report them when they do, and offer vital support. And the girls themselves need to be aware of their rights and risks, and know what to do in an emergency.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges governments to protect children against all forms of abuse, exploitation and violence. But many countries still lack a proper child protection system, or the system is weak, poorly coordinated and under-funded. Or the public (and potential and actual victims) do not trust the system, or even know that it exists. Some parts of the system may be culturally or psychologically insensitive. Individual initiatives are poorly coordinated or not integrated into the wider system. For example, doctors may not know they have to report a case of abuse to the police; the police may not follow it up; the school may expel a girl who becomes pregnant.

Protection systems tend to consist of three parts (Figure 1):

- **Government:** A formal system managed by various branches of the government, consisting of the police and justice systems, health, education and psychosocial services.
- **Civil society:** Non-government organisations that offer a range of services, raise awareness about children’s rights, and lobby for change.
- **Community:** Families and community members who protect their children from abuse, following traditional norms and practices.

Ideally, these components should depend on and reinforce one another. Individual girls rely on their family, friends and others in the community to keep them from harm. Government systems and NGO initiatives work with the community and with individuals, while NGOs help strengthen government services.

But in practice, the elements often do not function well. Government systems are often weak and poorly coordinated. Communities fail to recognise abuse, or they support practices such as early marriage. Civil society often ends up trying to plug the gaps. The result is all too often a set of disconnected services that oppose rather than complement each other.

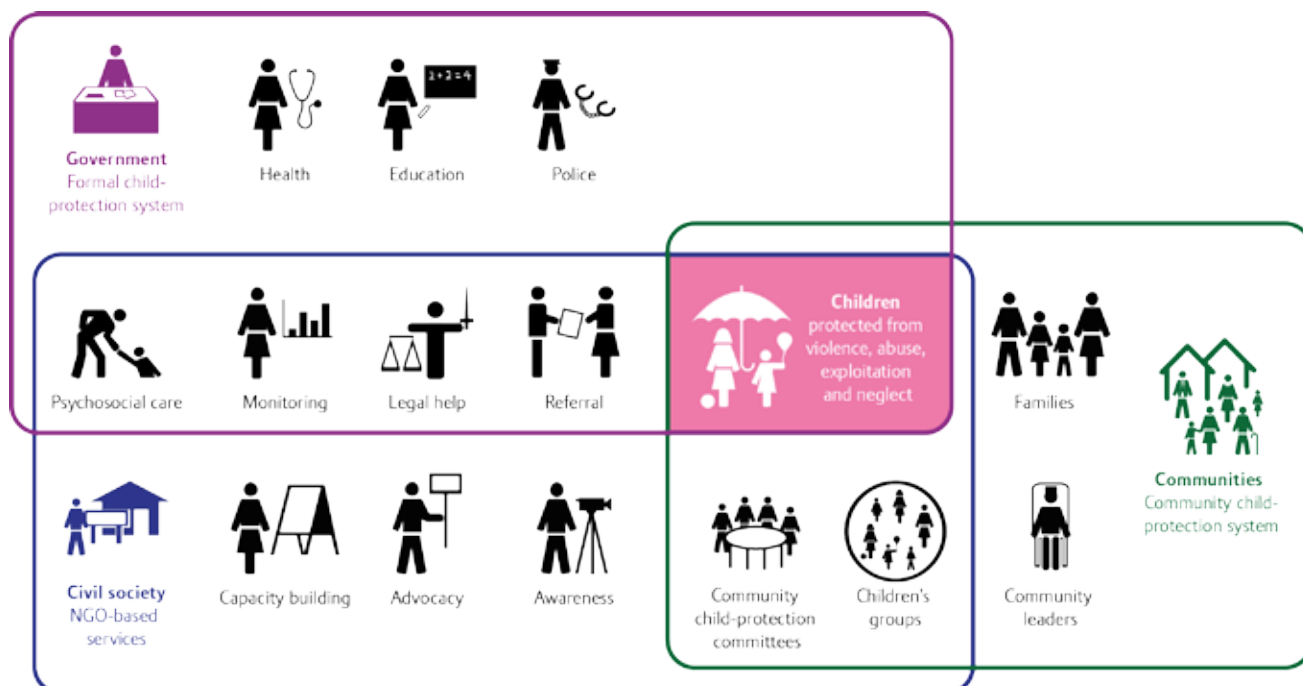


Figure 1. Child-protection systems consist of three components, each with different emphases

Girl Power strategies

A major focus of the Girl Power Programme was to make national child-protection systems work better. In addition to strengthening their functions, we hoped that our work would also help eliminate some of the underlying causes of gender-based violence: traditional social attitudes that value girls less than boys, and deep-rooted inequalities in societies and the socio-economic status of the family.

We worked on child protection at four levels:

- **Government:** strengthening government agencies
- **Civil society:** enhancing the role of non-government organizations
- **Community:** helping local people protect girls
- **Individual:** working with girls and young women, individually and in groups.

Getting governments to work better

The first step was for the Girl Power partners in each country to understand the current situation. We reviewed the current system, and identified what worked well and what gaps remained. We held meetings with the various government agencies and jointly came up with ideas to strengthen the system further. These ideas fell into several categories.

Strengthening institutions. We helped develop child-friendly laws and policies, and supported the establishment of child- and girl-friendly protection centres and special units in the justice system, at police stations and in hospitals. We helped set up a child helpline in Zambia and strengthened similar helplines in Nepal and other countries. That gave girls (and boys) somewhere to go for help that catered especially to their needs.

Improving links. A common problem is that the different parts of a child-protection system do not inform each other. We strengthened the ties between government and non-governmental services, and gave them the means to refer cases to each other and to collaborate. We helped governments to improve coordination across sectors, and organised meetings for staff from different agencies to plan their response to problems. We

Box 1. Girl Power

The Girl Power Programme (2011–2015) fought the injustice that girls and young women face every day. It did so by trying to ensure that they have equal rights and opportunities. It worked in 10 countries: Bangladesh, Bolivia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Sierra Leone and Zambia. Local organizations in each country implemented the activities.

Girl Power focused on four main themes:

- **Protection** against violence and abuse
- Access to post-primary **education**
- Socio-political **participation**
- **Economic empowerment** of girls and young women.

The programme was supported by the Dutch government and was coordinated by the Girl Power Alliance, a group of six Dutch non-governmental organisations.

Box 2. Children's Legal Protection Centre in Ethiopia

The African Child Policy Forum, a Girl Power partner in Ethiopia, has been working with the Federal Supreme Court to strengthen the administration of child justice. This resulted in the establishment of the Federal Child Justice Project Office within the Supreme Court in 2012. The office works in partnership with local and international partners and operates under government oversight.

The new office has been busy. It has provided free legal aid to 11,000 children (including 4,454 girls). It has arranged psychosocial services for over 1,300 children through its referral system and

a victims' support fund. It has supported DNA testing for 82 children, enabling 70 of them to know who their true fathers are.

This work is the result of a set of initiatives by the African Child Policy Forum. It trained 800 professionals in the justice and other sectors how to handle children's cases. It set up a legal and psychosocial referral network at the federal level involving 37 government and non-governmental organisations to improve the quality and reach of the referral process. It introduced guidelines on how to investigate children's cases

and how to improve courtroom set-ups, the referral process and record keeping. The presidents of the federal and regional supreme courts have unanimously endorsed these guidelines.

The federal and regional courts are now gradually taking over child-justice offices; they have provided them with space and cover some of their administrative costs. The Ministry of Education has recognised the training they offer as part of its technical and vocational education programme.

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also offered financial and technical support. That made it possible for the system to address each case from several angles: health, education, justice and social welfare.

Raising skills. Staff need both guidance and the professional and social skills to deal with the victims of violence and abuse. Where necessary, we supported the development of practical tools and introduced codes of practice to guide the staff's behaviour, and coached them on how to apply the new regulations and standards. We developed models and manuals that the government agencies could use in their work. We arranged study visits so staff from Zambia and Nepal could see how other countries dealt with child protection issues.

Improving record-keeping and monitoring. We offered training on monitoring and evaluation, and suggested models for managing cases and data. We tried to ensure that the child protection systems are effective and accountable.

Box 3. Schools help stop early marriages

Many Ethiopian girls marry very young – forced by poverty, pressure from their parents and social customs to drop out of school and into wedlock. In Lasta, a district in northern Amhara Region, child marriages account for 51% of all weddings.

That is beginning to change as a result of a campaign by Girl Power. Schools in the district have formed special committees to prevent child marriages: these include the community administration, a police officer, the community education and training board, the parent–teacher

association, the school principal, model students, the school supervisor and the coordinators of girls or gender clubs. This committee serves as a watchdog. Students and teachers can report to it if they hear of a planned child marriage or other risks to children. Some schools have a box where people can report such cases anonymously.

Such committees have already prevented around 400 child marriages in Lasta, and 41 other schools have copied the idea.

Enhancing the role of non-governmental organizations

NGOs and community organisations play several vital roles. They help maintain and improve the informal community child-protection system. They run various services, for example by identifying and reporting cases of abuse, and by raising awareness and changing attitudes in the community and the government. They build the capacity of the government system, facilitate links with it, and help it put appropriate standards and procedures in place.

Girl Power promoted coordination and synergy among the various civil society organisations working on children's issues, and established or strengthened referral networks. This expanded the reach of the networks and standardised and improved the quality of services they provide. The various non-governmental service providers now know how to communicate and refer cases to each other.

We also built the capacity of civil society organisations to help community members foster positive social norms and values, to keep track of incidences of violence against girls so they could improve how they respond, and to collect and draw lessons from such data.

Working with the community

It is the community that can best help prevent abuse against girls, and can offer them support if it does occur. Conversely, if the community fails to recognise abuse or is unsympathetic, the victims' situation is a lot worse. So it is important to promote positive social norms and strengthen the role of communities in protecting girls and young women.

Box 4. Child-marriage-free villages in Bangladesh

The leaders of 294 villages in Bangladesh have declared their communities as “free of child marriages”, thanks to local action stimulated by Girl Power partner organizations. Forcing girls into marriage at an early age robs them of their right to childhood, cuts short their education and jeopardises their health. World-wide, Bangladesh has the third-highest proportion of such marriages, after only Niger and Chad. According to the United Nations Fund for Population Activities,

about two out of three Bangladeshi girls will be wed before their 18th birthday. Most live in rural areas, are from poor households and have little or no education.

The “child-marriage-free village” campaign aims to convince local leaders – religious leaders, marriage registrars and community members – of the need and desirability of changing this deeply rooted practice. It has been recommended

that this approach be expanded to cover the whole of Bangladesh. Girl Power partners are using a similar approach in Ethiopia, Pakistan and Zambia.

More information: UNFPA. 2012. Marrying too young. tinyurl.com/kpw3gmo

Watkins, K. 2013. Accelerating progress to 2015: Bangladesh. The Good Planet Foundation. Report to the UN Special Envoy for Global Education. tinyurl.com/nwe9un2

We organised regular community conversations, conducted visits house-to-house, and run campaigns through schools and the local media. We worked with local leaders to formulate and enforce community by-laws. In Zambia, for example, we brought together traditional leaders who are custodians of culture and exert a lot of influence locally. They said that girls should stay in school, and agreed to ban child marriages. A similar project in Bangladesh led to hundreds of villages being declared as “child-marriage-free” (Box 4). By convincing local leaders of the damage that child marriages cause, we turned them from guardians of a harmful tradition into champions of gender equity.

Building girls’ capacities

Girls themselves can advocate for their rights – if they know how. We trained them on a range of themes: their basic rights, life skills, confidence-building, how to express their opinions, and how to say no to sexual violence. They also learned about the risks they face: trafficking, child marriage, bullying, corporal punishment, sexual harassment, online abuse. They learned about sexual health and how to protect themselves better.

By working together and supporting one another, girls are stronger. We created children’s and girls’ groups in schools, as well as in the community so we could reach those who do not go to school. We made it possible for groups to visit other districts to talk to leaders and share experiences and ideas with other groups. We took them on educational trips to motivate them further.

As a result, the girls we worked with now feel able to voice their opinions and talk to outsiders, leaders and officials. We obviously were not able to reach all the girls in the countries we operated in. But those we trained now act as role models, influencing their friends, families and communities. In Nepal, for example, girls groups talked with the police to learn about the protection services and what they could do in case of harassment.

In 2014, the Girl Power Programme reached more than 88,500 girls and young women in 10 countries with life-skills training: sports, sexual and reproductive health rights, basic numeracy and leadership skills. We supported more than 1,000 child protection committees, village development committees, village education protection committees, mothers’ clubs and other community mechanisms to protect children. We provided them with training on gender, domestic violence, legal information, leadership and organisation and mediation, and we linked them to referral organisations.

We supported 11 child helplines in nine countries. Together, these helplines have responded to more than 275,000 calls from children, half of them girls.

Girl Power partners supported 239 shelters for victims of gender-based violence and other forms of abuse in Bangladesh, Bolivia, Ethiopia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan and Sierra Leone. In 2014 we supported 16 centres for socio-legal support to victims of gender-based violence and other abuse in Bolivia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Nicaragua and Sierra Leone. In Pakistan, we offered socio-legal support through a pool of 51 volunteer lawyers across the country.

What happened to Almaz?

One day, Almaz ran into an old school friend at the local market place. She was a member of a girls' club supported by Girl Power. Almaz told her story, and her friend took her to a meeting of the club. There, she learned that she could report the neighbour who had raped her, get help so she could go back to school, and get psychological support.

She is now back in school. A helpline gave her with psychosocial support, and she now feels better about herself and her future. A legal defence centre brought the neighbour to trial. Almaz's life has changed: "I was alienated but am now integrated", she says.



Box 5. Training community reporters in Bolivia

Since 2012, more than 50 girls and young women in 14 municipalities in Bolivia have learned reporting skills and how to use radio, television and smartphones to express their views. We also trained them on subjects such as self-esteem, leadership, gender issues and rights, and community development. They now act as reporters and spokespersons in their communities, promoting issues such as education, protection and participation on community radio and television. The participants also comment on national television and radio programmes: valuable input to the planners of such broadcasts.

This initiative helps these young people to claim the right to speak out and report violations of their rights. From their

early childhood, girls are taught to keep their mouths shut. We are trying to change that by enabling girls to protect themselves and each other.

Young people often pay more attention to their peers than to their elders. An active, informed, opinionated group of people who know how to use the media can play a key role in changing the attitudes and behaviour of an entire generation.

More information: Tarija Education and Research Centre for Rural Women, <http://ccimcat.es.tripod.com/>

Sample videos (in Spanish): [youtube.com/1MXwZHekMTc](https://www.youtube.com/1MXwZHekMTc), [youtube.com/IEinRWgJLPA](https://www.youtube.com/IEinRWgJLPA)

Recommendations

Governments

- **Inform all girls** how to avoid violence, and make sure that they, their families, schools and communities know where to report violence if it happens.
- Make sure that protection systems are **culturally and socially sensitive** and fit the needs of the victims and potential victims. They should be unbureaucratic and child- and women-friendly. The victims of abuse and violence must get the justice they deserve.
- **Strengthen the links** and synergies between formal and informal child-protection systems. Actively involve **civil society organisations** in child-protection initiatives. Draw on their expertise and links with the community.
- **Involve the community** in protecting children. Recognise and promote informal and community-based child-protection systems, and engage them in formal systems.

- **Work across sectors.** Bring in all relevant stakeholders to improve girls' lives. Ensure that the **justice, health, social welfare and education systems** communicate and work together.
- **Monitor** cases of violence against children and young women, and the responses by the protection system. The monitoring system must integrate information from all relevant sectors – health, police, justice, etc. – and the data must be made available to ensure accountability.
- It is not enough to pass laws: they must also be **enforced**. Ensure that the child protection system covers all parts of the country.
- Ensure that enough **professional staff** are available to provide the services required. Sensitise staff and build their capacity to handle this type of work. Provide them with the guidelines, tools, standards and procedures they require. Ensure that there are sufficient staff to deliver child protection services at the grassroots level,
- **Provide enough resources** to ensure the child-protection system is functioning. Be prepared to increase services: greater awareness is likely to boost demand for child protection.

Civil society

- When developing services to plug a gap, work out how to **sustain** them over the long term. Plan how to hand over the responsibilities to the government.
- Continue with **advocacy, capacity building and monitoring** work. Even if the government system works well, work is still needed at the community level.
- Mobilise resources and skills to **support the government system**. Provide the government with models, manuals, training and codes of conduct.
- **Empower girls and young women** to play an active role in the child protection system and to demand quality services.
- **Be prepared to adjust roles** from speaking on behalf of girls, to empowering them, to working with them (rather than just for them).
- **Make a broader case** for governments and donors to continue to invest in child protection systems. Emphasise how they not only protect children, but also contribute to the wellbeing and development of future generations of citizens.

Donors

- **Include child protection as a priority** in the development agenda. Build and strengthen the system and improve coordination among its various components. Consider child-protection issues in all projects.
- **Understand both the local and national contexts.** Talk to people at all levels, understand traditional models and customs, and work out how to build on them.
- **Be committed for the long term.** Improving child protection is not a task that can be accomplished overnight. Systems must be run after they are set up.

Private sector

- As an absolute minimum, **behave ethically** and comply with child-protection laws.
- Beyond this, **support the communities** in which you operate. Be aware and raise awareness of children's issues in the community and among workers.
- Support child-protection systems as a central part of **corporate social responsibility** efforts. For example, consider funding child helplines and drop-in centres for victims of violence.

The Girl Power Alliance

- Child Helpline International
- Defence for Children-ECPAT
- Free Press Unlimited
- International Child Development Initiatives
- Plan Netherlands
- Women Win

tinyurl.com/ppzueun (in Dutch)

Lessons from the Girl Power Programme 2011–2015

Briefs in this series

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- Building alliances on girls' issues

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