

# Helping girls get organised

Lessons from the Girl Power Programme 2011–2015



Girl Power Alliance



# Helping girls get organised

**I**T IS DIFFICULT for individuals, however motivated and talented, to make a difference to the world on their own. To have an impact, they need to be part of a group that can give them support and inspiration.

That is especially true for girls and young women, who are often treated as second-class citizens, deprived of basic rights and victim to all sorts of violence. The community does not take their needs and concerns into account. It is only by getting organised that they can gain the confidence, skills and critical mass to improve their situation.

Girl Power (Box 1) believed that helping girls and young women get organised is a key to their empowerment. We worked with them at the most critical time of their lives – adolescence. When they are empowered, they contribute not only to their own situation; they also improve the wellbeing of their families, their communities and their country. Everyone benefits. Girls and young women are the major stakeholders in this process and they are the front-runners in bringing about the desired change.

## Why work with groups?

We worked with groups of girls, rather than individuals, for several reasons.

- **Groups are more effective.** People can achieve more as a group than they can through their individual efforts. Members can help themselves, change their immediate environment, and influence public opinion. They can get services from the government or NGOs that are difficult or impossible for individuals to obtain.
- **Groups facilitate learning.** The members can learn from one other, gain confidence, share experiences, and inspire and support each other.
- **Groups benefit their members.** Individual girls can gain confidence and learn from the other members. The group can help girls who have experienced violence recover and regain their sense of dignity, self-esteem and confidence, hastening the healing process. Groups also help with reporting: members are more likely to report violence and abuse than girls who are not in a group.
- **Groups empower.** By coming together and trading ideas, girls can find their own voice. Groups act as talent incubators, helping leaders emerge and enabling their members to achieve their potential. They can be particularly effective in influencing public opinion and the government.
- **Groups strengthen the community.** Their members can learn about their rights and think of and act on issues that concern others. Groups are more visible and easier to recognise than individuals, and can become an important part of the social fabric.
- **Groups make development work more efficient.** Groups make it possible for organisations such as Girl Power to reach more people more effectively than they could by working with individuals.

### Key messages

**Groups empower.** By forming groups, girls and young women can learn about their rights, exchange ideas and achieve a critical mass that can influence their peers, family, community and governments.

It is best to work with **existing groups** where possible, rather than trying to create groups from scratch. Suitable incubators include schools, savings-and-loans associations, and groups learning employment skills.

**The most appropriate approach** will depend on the circumstances. “Fun” activities such as sport, and “useful” activities such as learning economic or job skills can provide opportunities for raising awareness and training on life skills.

**Media and street theatre** are good ways both to empower girls and to influence their peers and the community.

“I do this work because I’m a girl with power, because I like to defend my rights, because I know that I’m empowered. I can contribute to create an environment free from violence.”

– Maryori (17), Nicaragua

## Types of groups

In many societies, girls have fewer opportunities than boys to socialise or to join groups. Their movements tend to be more restricted: afraid for their safety, parents refuse to allow them to go out by themselves or to stay on after school. Girls tend to have more household chores than boys; they are expected to help with the cooking, cleaning and looking after younger siblings. Nevertheless, girls' groups do exist, and we worked with them where possible: we did not have to worry about establishing procedures, finding a place and time to meet, or creating a viable internal dynamic. Recruiting members was also simple: girls join a group because they are interested in its aims and activities, and many do so through friends. We worked with church groups, student bodies, associations that run community festivals, and friends who come together to discuss things that interest them.

### School clubs

Many groups are organised through schools, by either interested teachers or the pupils themselves. They may focus on activities such as music, sports or hobbies. Some clubs are for girls only, while others include both boys and girls. We worked with both types.

### Savings and loan groups

Savings groups generally meet each week or month; each member pays a small amount into a common pot. The pooled amount is then lent out to a member who currently needs money. The borrower repays the amount with interest, so increasing the group's joint capital. Such groups enable their members to invest in small businesses, or pay for emergency expenses (the rules vary from group to group on how the money may be used).

### Groups organised around economic activities

Groups of girls and young women who get together to learn job-related skills are particularly effective at mobilising on gender issues. The members of such groups want to use their skills to get a job, manage a business and earn money, so they are interested in any ideas they can use to move ahead. Their parents and spouses support their participation in the group as they know that their families will benefit economically.

### Online groups

The spread of mobile phones has opened up new ways for girls to get organised and to communicate with each other. While most groups are still face-to-face, mobiles let their members keep in touch from anywhere and at any time. This is particularly important for girls who have to spend much of their time at home and indoors. In Girl Power, mobiles made it possible to produce call-in radio programmes, with many girls sharing their views and opinions and discussing a wide range of topics. In general, mobile phones give development organisations a new way to keep in contact and to disseminate information.

### Networks of groups

Individual groups can have a bigger impact if they are part of a wider association or network. Such coalitions can talk to local authorities about girls' rights, lobby the government to allocate more money or change policies, and help non-governmental organisations to tailor their programmes and improve the way they are delivered (Box 2). In Nepal, we brought organisations working on girls' and women's issues together and helped form district Girl Power networks. These networks lobbied district government agencies, and became an important link in referral networks for cases of abuse or violence against girls.

### 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.



## Group activities

When we started work with a group, we first ascertained its needs and identified the opportunities and types of intervention that might be appropriate. We then tailored our approach accordingly. The facilitators and advisors for the groups included specialists from the Girl Power partner organisations and other non-governmental organisations, teachers and counsellors. We tried to help leaders and role models emerge from the groups themselves; such individuals were vital in nurturing the groups and helping them decide on their focus. Apart from facilitation, Girl Power provided modest amounts of funding for equipment, as well as transport and catering so the groups could meet and undertake activities.

Activities included community mobilisation and awareness raising. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, for example, girls' clubs made house visits to talk to people about preventing Ebola infections. After the epidemic, they organised rallies to convince parents to send their children back to school. Girl Power helped these groups to design and organise such activities. Many groups were quick to take the initiative and organise their own events. In Liberia, Girl Power partners even contracted networks of girls' groups initiated by the programme to implement community activities.

The various group activities were mutually reinforcing. For example, talking to girls about economic issues led to discussions about how they could continue their education. Holding discussions gave them the confidence to speak up in public.

### Raising awareness of rights and protection services

We taught girls their basic rights – for example, that it's OK to say no to sex, how to resist unwelcome advances, and what to do if they are abused, attacked or raped. In many cultures, it is the victim who is blamed, not the perpetrator. We taught them that being abused is not their fault, and how victims can get the justice and help they need.

### Training on life skills

We offered formal and informal training on a wide range of life skills:

- **Cognitive skills** such as critical thinking and problem-solving
- **Emotional skills** such as self-awareness and assertiveness
- **Leadership** and organising skills
- **Collaboration skills** such as planning, managing
- **Communication**, including presentation skills, video production and street theatre
- **Health**, including reproductive health and pregnancy
- **Livelihoods**, including job skills, money management and savings-and-loans.

We tried to make learning as realistic as possible. For example, in workshops on teenage pregnancies, we provided sex education to mixed groups of boys and girls. The participants had to practise with a baby doll: they had to take care of it for a few days as if it were a real baby.

### Sport

In many societies, it is not accepted for girls to take part in sports. We found ways of offering them an opportunity to do so – for example, by doing sports in an enclosed area or indoors. The type of sport chosen had to be accepted by the community.

### Box 2. A girls' coalition in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the Girl Power Programme helped form a coalition of 800 girls and young women representing around 200 villages. They did so to make their voices heard at the national level.

In 2012 the coalition organised its first convention. This has turned into an annual event where the members can explain their vision and problems, plan together, and press the government and other organisations to ensure their rights and safety. The guests have included the ministers of women and children affairs, social affairs, and culture, as well as senior officials from the social services.

The government has committed support to the coalition, and has included several of its demands in the Children's Act, passed in 2013.

Sexual harassment is already a crime, but enforcement is lax. During the coalition's annual convention, a district commissioner stated that any type of violence is unacceptable, including forced child marriage. He encouraged girls to contact the police to report cases.

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Members of a girls' club in Freetown supported by Defence for Children  
Photo: Marusja Aangeenbrug, Plan Netherlands

### Box 3. Empowering myself, empowering others



A CRECER demonstration against street harassment in Chinandega, Nicaragua. Photo: FCAM

Every Saturday, Ilsa and Maryori (both 17) produce a radio programme on girls' issues in Chinandega, a city in western Nicaragua. They talk about menstruation, sexual and reproductive health and rights, what girls and adolescents feel, fear and think.

"When I come to the radio, I realise that my ideas are valuable, because people listen to me, and somehow I'm empowering others", says Maryori.

Their work is not limited to the radio. Street harassment is a serious problem for Nicaraguan women, and many feel they cannot walk around safely. So CRECER, the group of girls and young women that Ilsa and Maryori belong to, is trying to do something about it. They stage demonstrations, and tour different neighbourhoods with a megaphone to draw attention to the issue. They hand out flyers about harassment, and talk to people, especially young women, about how to prevent it.

**More information:** FCAM (Fundo Centroamericano de Mujeres), <https://fcmujeres.org>, [info@fcmujeres.org](mailto:info@fcmujeres.org)

"I became pregnant when I was in high school by a man who used to cater for my education. When I delivered I felt shy to go back to school because my friends will make mockery of me. I joined the young women's club in our community, which empowered me and built myself esteem. I didn't look down upon myself again and went back to school"

– A participant in life-planning sessions

Some of the results were surprising. In Pakistan, we set up karate groups so girls could learn self-defence as well as self-confidence. Many parents were sceptical at first, but they gave their permission for their daughters to take part. Now they are proud of their achievements.

### Raising community awareness

We helped the girls' groups to spread the word about girls' rights through street theatre and the media. Drama groups wrote and performed plays within their communities. They learned journalistic and production skills so they could conduct interviews and produce programmes for broadcast on the radio, television and the internet (Box 3).

These activities made girls' issues more visible in the community, and led to marked changes in attitudes and behaviour. The girls incorporated their own personal experiences and misfortunes into the drama and programmes. If a single girl stands up and speaks her mind about, say, sexual harassment, people in the community do not listen. But if the girls present the same ideas in a play, the audience sits up and takes notice.



Girls practise karate in Bangladesh. Photo: Plan Bangladesh

## Engaging in and leading the community

More and more girls and young women are now taking part in community meetings and voicing their views. They no longer stay in the background and serve tea to the male participants; they are taking on leadership positions and are seen as role models for the younger generation. In turn, communities are beginning to protect girls' rights more actively. Male community leaders are starting to encourage girls and young women to engage in community and economic life.

## Influencing the authorities

The best people to speak on behalf of girls are girls themselves. We helped groups identify their needs and the changes they wanted to see. We gave them the skills they needed to lobby the authorities and to campaign for their rights and for better services. Such work led to a range of improvements. In Nepal, for example, several groups persuaded their local governments to allocate money for activities for girls and young women. In Bolivia, girls were actively involved in the drafting of a new law (Box 5).

Sometimes a change may seem small but is significant nonetheless. For example, in Ethiopia, the Addis Ababa police now has separate waiting rooms for children and women who want to report abuse, and provides allowances for transport. In Nicaragua, girls can talk to policewomen – having female officers take the victim's statement can encourage reporting of such cases.

## Challenges

### Problems at home

Parents are often sceptical about their daughters' joining girls' groups. They want them to stay at home for their own safety, or to do household chores. They fear that the girls will learn unsuitable things and start behaving in an inappropriate way, bringing dishonour to the family. Such problems are particularly acute in rural areas, where distances are longer, social taboos are stricter, and illiteracy rates are higher.

Breaking through such barriers can be difficult. It may be possible to hold group meetings at times or places that are more convenient and that avoid worries about safety. It is often necessary to convince parents that both the girls and their families will benefit from the group sessions.

### Box 5. COMUNNAs, platforms for social change in Bolivia

Girls and young women have been playing an active role in COMUNNAs, groups of young people that urge local authorities in Bolivia to improve their services. They have demanded that municipal charters be revised so as to reduce violence and improve education.

In Sica Sica, a town in the Altiplano in western Bolivia, the COMUNNAs pressed the local authority to increase funding for sports. In nearby Calamarca, they lobbied the local farmers' union to open its discussions to young people, including girls.

Daysi (17), from the community of Pucarani, was nominated to a committee to draft a new law. She faced opposition from male leaders, but they eventually acknowledged that girls and young women had a right to be represented in the discussions.

"Each girl and young women has abilities, talents... their own children have a lot of capacity the problem is that you do not support them ... I told the group", she said. "My dream is to be someone important, to be a leader and be able to

"My daughter and I watched the play with others at the local Ananda Bazar. After watching it, I couldn't hold my tears. I held my daughter and cried right there. I could never realise how difficult it is for girls who are married off at early ages. I have now promised that I will not marry off my daughter at a young age."

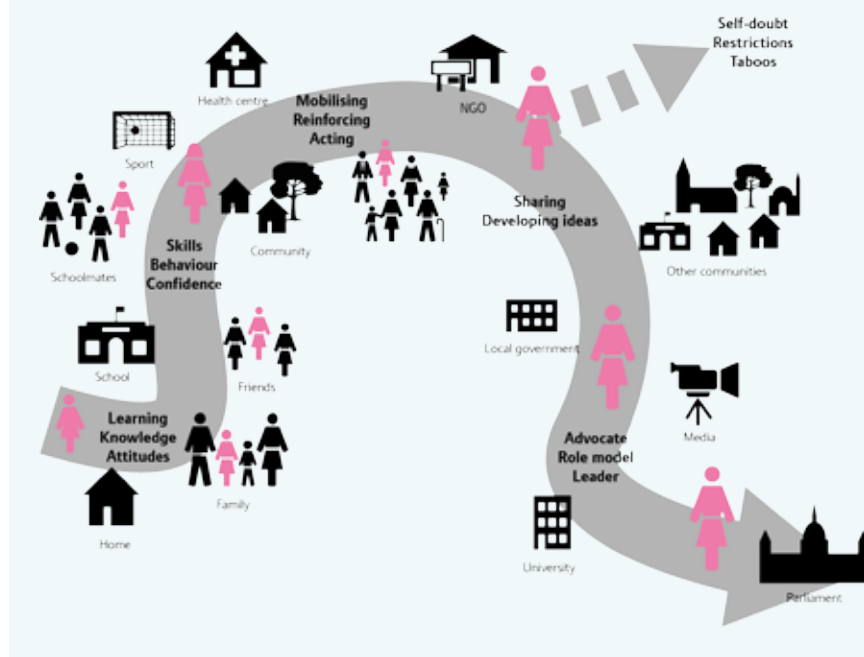
– Monwara Begun (35)  
housewife, whose husband  
drives a bicycle rickshaw

help the most marginalised communities of Pucarani"

Community advocacy groups have been recognised in the charters of 11 municipalities. These groups aim to combat violence against girls and women in these communities.

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## Box 4. A pathway to empowerment



As she grows up, a girl comes into contact with a widening circle of people. Starting with her family, she moves on to friends and schoolmates, then other people in the community, then fellow students and workmates. But she may find her circle narrow again when she gets married or if she does not go on to study and get a job.

At each stage, she also has a chance to influence the people she comes into contact with: she can help other girls learn about their rights and encourage them to demand justice.

Some girls become advocates, role models and leaders, and can influence a much wider range of people. And why stop there? A girl can be whatever she wants to be... even President!

## Out of school

Schools are convenient places to work with groups, but what if the girls do not go to school, or are forced to drop out? If we worked only with school pupils, we would have missed out on the poorest, most disadvantaged girls – the ones who are most likely to be forced into early marriage. In Ghana, we worked with adolescent girls who did not go to school. It was difficult to reach and organise these girls, and they found it hard to attend regular meetings. But we noted a positive shift in many of our projects in Africa: it is becoming increasingly acceptable for pregnant girls to continue their education. Many of them return to school after childbirth, often encouraged by school girls' clubs.

*"I don't know book but I will talk what's on my mind."*

*– An illiterate young woman at a meeting*

## Livelihoods

Training girls and young women in skills they can use to get a job or run a small business is a promising way to improve their position in society. But the options are limited. Some jobs are traditionally regarded as suitable for women, such as sewing and hairdressing. But a small community has no need for ten hairdressers, so training more would be pointless. Other "women's jobs" (such as nursing or running a beauty parlour) or neutral jobs (such as computer work), may be acceptable, but force them to leave the area if they want a job. Teaching them skills that are traditionally seen as a male domain (such as driving a vehicle) may lead to opposition from men.

We tried various approaches, with varying degrees of success: linking to existing training centres and scholarship programmes, providing follow-up training and support, and using apprenticeships and mentoring.

Livelihood projects had a major empowering effect. One project in Nepal built on existing village savings-and-loans associations and women's cooperatives; it incorporated ideas of protection and political participation in their work, reaching thousands of women. Our training courses on livelihood skills reached fewer women, but even so they had a powerful effect on norms and values. Economic participation by young women is now more accepted, and the women who use their new skills to earn a living are inspiring other girls to follow.

## Sustainability

The sustainability of the girls' groups was of concern for two reasons. One was the rapid turnover in membership: as they grow older, members tend to leave, and it is necessary to replace them with new, younger members if the group is not with decline. This problem is particularly acute with the leaders. They are often the most capable members, so are the most likely to find a job outside the community. Replacing them can be difficult.

The second problem was the end of support as the Girl Power Programme drew to a close. Many of our partner organisations will continue to work with the girls' groups, both formally with funding from other sources, and informally in other ways. The stronger groups do not need much outside support: occasional visits to monitor their activities and offer advice. We also accept that some groups will not continue: this is a natural sequence of events. Such groups have already fulfilled their purpose of empowering their members and raising their profile.

## Reaching other girls

The members of a group learn new skills and benefit in many other ways. But how to spread the benefits to other girls who are not members? Some ways we did this:

- Through the group's **outreach activities**, such as awareness raising and work with the media.
- By attracting **new members** to join – for example by adding new types of activities that non-members would find interesting.
- By **peer-to-peer training** – for example, by arranging for a group focusing on the media to teach the members of another group how to ask critical questions, develop and express their own opinions, and produce a video.
- By having experienced members in an established group form new **offshoot groups**.

## Involving boys

It may be a good idea to involve boys in girls' groups for several reasons. One is negative: boys may resent or even be hostile to groups they see as exclusive or damaging to their own interests. But there are positive reasons to include boys too: it is a good idea to try to influence males (who are the perpetrators of most of the violence against girls and women), and boys have a lot to contribute in terms of opinions, talent and energy. See the separate brief in this series on **Engaging boys and men**.

## Recommendations

- Facilitate the formation of groups of girls and young women, and give them the assistance they need to develop and express their own ideas. Do not speak on behalf of them: Let them speak by themselves.
- Recognise girls' and young women's groups as separate entities, encourage their activities, and involve them as stakeholders in policy decisions.
- Liaise with such groups to determine the opinions and priorities of the female half of the population. Use them as a way of disseminating ideas and information to their peers.
- Ensure that girls' and young women's groups are sustainable, even after the end of project funding.

### 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](http://tinyurl.com/ppzueun) (in Dutch)

### Lessons from the Girl Power Programme 2011–2015

#### Briefs in this series

- Empowering girls: Learning what works
- Making child protection systems work better
- Engaging boys and men
- Helping girls get organised
- Building alliances on girls' issues

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