Empowering girls:
Learning what works

Lessons from the Girl Power Programme 2011–2015

Girl Power Alliance

Empowering girls: Learning what works

Compare two children somewhere in the developing world: a boy and a girl. The boy has to face many challenges: getting good grades in school, dealing with the trials of adolescence, keeping out of trouble, finding a job.

The girl has a whole lot more problems. She is less likely to go to school, and if she does attend primary school, she is less likely to continue on to secondary education. Many homes do not have toilets, so she may have to wait until dark before she can go outside to relieve herself. She has to help with household chores while her brother plays football. She may be harassed or even raped when she is away from home. She may be forced into an early marriage with someone old enough to be her father. And she is less likely to enter the workforce or be able to dream of a career.

Overcoming such injustice is very difficult: it is one of the hardest tasks in human development, as the slow progress of gender equality in the developed world shows. It is not just a matter of the law. In many societies, girls have equal rights on paper, but reality is very different.

The **Girl Power Programme** (Box 1) helped empower girls and young women in 10 countries in three continents. It worked at three levels:

- **Individual:** It helped girls and young women claim their rights.

- **Socio-cultural:** It supported families, neighbours and wider communities.

- **Institutional:** It enabled government and civil society organisations to respond to the needs of girls and young women (see table).

These themes and levels reinforced each other. For example, a project focusing on violence might educate girls on their rights (individual level), work with families and community leaders to detect and deter attacks against girls and women (socio-cultural), and help the police and legal system deal with cases of violence that do occur (institutional).

Civil society as an agent of change. Local NGOs designed and implemented projects under the Girl Power Programme. They included both formal organisations and networks in each country, as well as small community organisations and groups of girls and boys. We regarded civil society as a key agent of change: we invested a lot of effort into strengthening these organisations so they could do their job better and spread the message of empowerment more effectively.

Working together. Empowering girls and young women is too big a task for just one organisation to tackle alone. So we worked together as an alliance at different levels. **Local organisations** coordinated their work within a particular district. At a **national level**, the Girl Power partners harmonised their activities through country steering committees. **Internationally**, the six Dutch members of the Girl Power Alliance jointly developed the programme and collaborated closely with each other and their partners in each country. They complemented each other's competencies, avoiding duplication of effort, and creating synergies. They also worked with other international NGOs and regional bodies, for example to harmonise legislation in Africa and Asia.

Key messages

A **learning agenda** aims to help individual organisations and partnerships learn how to improve their activities. It is a conscious set of activities that involve staff throughout the organisation to analyse what they do, identify problems, and work out how to solve them.

Putting a learning agenda into practice takes **commitment** from all concerned, especially from the top management.

The learning agenda must be designed in a way that it **generates useful lessons** that can be fed back into the project's work. The project itself must be flexible enough to allow such changes.

The learning agenda can benefit the **organisation as a whole** beyond the individual project. It can also influence the organisation's **partners**.

Benefits for the Girl Power Programme included changes in the types of interventions made, a wider range of beneficiaries, strengthened partner organisations, a new organisational culture of learning, and an expanded scale of activities.

A learning agenda should be part of a wider effort to create an **organisational learning culture**. It should not be seen as merely business as usual.

Examples of Girl Power's work

Themes	Levels of intervention		
	Individual support	**Socio-cultural change**	**Institutional change**
Protection	Assisting victims of violence Making child helplines easily accessible Enhancing self-confidence and self-esteem of girls through sports such as football and karate	Supporting community leaders who want to prevent child marriage or female genital mutilation	Lobbying government to introduce or change laws Training police officers, teachers, health and social workers and other government front line staff how to improve protection services for girls
Education	Supporting girls who want to continue their education	Raising awareness on girls' right to education	Helping create girl-friendly educational policies
Participation	Enhancing girls' confidence and self-esteem Leadership training for girls	Training communities on gender so as to improve the socio-cultural status of girls and women in society Involving girls and young women in school committees and community consultations	Including girls and boys in municipal consultations Supporting networks of girls and young women's organisations to lobby the government
Economic	Training young women in business skills and helping them manage their own enterprises	Making it acceptable for young women to work, also in traditionally male jobs	Ensuring that young women can get loans

A learning agenda

With such a complex set of issues, it was vital to learn what works and what does not. So learning was a specific component of the Girl Power Programme. This brief describes how we went about learning from our experience and how the lessons improved the approaches we used. Other briefs in the series examine specific aspects of the programme in more detail.

All development projects include a monitoring and evaluation component. But Girl Power went further than this: it created a forum devoted solely for learning, and trained managers and staff how to share their experience and learn from it.

Learning how to learn

The first step was to begin creating a learning culture among the local organisations we worked with. The staff, including the field staff, were familiarised with the concepts of action learning (Box 2). They were encouraged to reflect critically on their work, share their reflections, identify successes and failures, and define new courses of actions based on the newly gained insights.

Although our main focus was on the Girl Power Programme, we also tried to stimulate a learning culture in the partner organisations themselves. An example of this: Plan Bangladesh adjusted its monitoring system to make it more flexible in tracking the progress of its projects.

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.

Deciding what to learn about

Learning, particularly organisational learning, does not happen automatically. Structures and procedures are needed. The design of the Girl Power Programme specified four key learning issues:

- Child protection systems

- The role of boys and men in empowering girls and young women

- Conditions and opportunities for girls and young women to organise themselves and participate in civil society

- Strategies for effective alliance building.

Soon after the Girl Power Programme was launched, the Dutch members of the alliance presented these topics to staff of the 10 country programmes at a special "learning agen-

Zambian girls performing a play. Girls themselves can play a leading role in raising awareness about the rights of girls and young women.

da" workshop. This workshop also detailed the purpose of the learning component and methods to be used.

Once they had returned home, the participants discussed the four issues with their colleagues and other organisations, and designed a learning agenda attuned to the situation in each country. This included detailed learning questions, plans for how to proceed, and methods to follow.

Senior management buy-in

It was important to get support from the senior management in the partner organisations. That ensured that the staff time and budget were allocated for the learning activities and created a mechanism for reporting to senior management. It also increased the chances that the lessons from the Girl Power Programme would be shared with the partners' other projects.

Exchanging experiences

Organisations in the Girl Power Programme went about learning in various ways.

- **Within individual projects**, the staff met every week or month to coordinate their work. They set aside time during these meetings to focus on solving problems and learning from their experiences.

- **Among projects in the same country.** The same approach was used to cross-fertilise ideas across projects and organisations working in the same country. This occurred at the quarterly programme coordination meetings, as well as at special annual reflection workshops.

- **Across countries.** Project managers and staff visited Girl Power activities in neighbouring countries. Staff from Nepal visited their counterparts in Bangladesh, while a regional workshop in 2014 enabled staff from Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh to share their experiences.

Box 3. 5Cs: Five crucial organisational capabilities

- **The capability to act and commit:** Can the organisation work properly, plan, make decisions and act on them?

- **The capability to deliver:** Can it do what it is supposed to do?

- **The capability to adapt and self-renew:** Can it learn and adapt with changing times?

- **The capability to relate to external stakeholders:** Can it build and maintain relationships with clients, the government, the private sector and NGOs?

- **The capability to achieve coherence:** Do its strategy and operations match its vision? Can it maintain a balance between stability and innovation?

Based on European Centre for Development Policy Management: www. ecdpm.org/5Cs

Box 4. Helping young women get organised in Nepal

Girls in Nepal are taught to be submissive. They learn not to express their feelings, and many do not go outside by themselves for fear of abuse.

Plan Nepal teaches such girls to be more confident and to assert their rights. But we found that training and raising awareness is not enough. Social expectations are too strong, and without continued support, the girls revert to the default mode of meek compliance.

So we helped the graduates of our life-skills courses to form organisations of young women so the members can help themselves. We helped create 57 such organisations with 3,080 members aged 16–24. The number of members continues to grow. Two district-level federations of young women were formed to lobby and advocate on issues that affect them.

The young women's organisations staged various events to benefit girls, young women, elderly people and people with disabilities. They worked closely with the local authorities and the central government, which provided them with funds. They persuaded schools to build separate toilets for girls, and 20 secondary schools in Myagdi district to supply sanitary pads. In collaboration with a bus company and the police, they put stickers against sexual violence in public transport. In three villages, they worked with the police and village development committees to restrict the times when people may drink alcohol.

The community appreciated these initiatives. More girls are now enrolled in high school, and fewer drop out of school – showing a shift in parents' attitudes. The girls have become more confident and assertive, and their movements are less restricted. Members of the young women's organisations are also taking on leadership roles in other organisations: women's cooperatives, and committees to manage forests, schools and water. Some represent civil society networks at the district level.

The girls in Adawso, in Ghana's Eastern Region, had listened to what the Girl Power project had to say. They had heard the project's advice on the importance of education and how to protect themselves against violence. But they paid little heed to it, and still turned to men and boys for daily necessities and little luxuries. Their parents, too poor to provide such items, complained that they had little influence over their daughters. This dependence increased the likelihood that the girls would get pregnant, drop out of school, or be threatened and beaten up.

The project had done a lot of work in the community on issues such as protecting girls against violence and improving their education. But it was making limited progress. A new approach was needed.

The solution was to start a system of mentors. This draws on a traditional view in Ghanaian society that raising children is not just their parents' responsibility: it is the entire community's job.

To test the idea, we selected 90 women (30 in each of three communities) as mentors. We trained them in basic counselling skills, good parenting, child development principles and how to deal with the physical and emotional needs of adolescent girls. We then matched each mentor with three girls in her neighbourhood. We gave the girls guidance on what to expect: the girls had to respect their mentors and be open to sharing problems that they might find difficult to discuss with their own mothers.

The mentors were asked to ensure their charges completed their basic education (up to the age of 15), did not drop out due to pregnancy or other reasons, and behaved well socially and morally.

The mentors met their charges frequently; they also discussed each girl's problems with her parents and her school performance with her teachers. Many of the mentors gave the girls schoolbooks or small gifts.

The girls appreciated the attention. They took their school work more seriously, helped more around the house, and improved their behaviour. Others gained too: the girls' mothers were relieved that they could share their burdens with a friendly advisor, and the teachers valued the assistance. And the mentors found that their standing in the community had gone up as a result of their work.

Joint monitoring and cross-visits

Members of the steering committees jointly monitored projects within their own countries. They also visited projects in other countries to learn how Girl Power partners there dealt with similar issues. These visits also included government officials, journalists, representatives of political parties, and members of community organisations. The results were used as input in reflections and to improve programme delivery.

Research

In Zambia, a university was asked to do research on lessons from the Girl Power Programme. Its report made it possible to focus on major issues and facilitated decision making. It is hoped to publish the findings in journal articles and a book on best practices.

Staff development

We believe that civil society has a major role to play in empowering girls and young women. So we paid particular attention to developing the capacity of our partner NGOs and community organisations. We used the 5C model to assess this capacity (Box 3). This let each organisation identify its weaknesses, and enabled Girl Power to plan training or other measures to plug the gaps.

Capacity needs are not static: they change as the situation or the programme itself changes. We organised training workshops to bring the organisational capacities in line with the new needs.

Using the lessons

All this effort was worthwhile. The local organisations working on Girl Power made some far-reaching changes in their activities as a result, and their work became more focused and effective. Here are some examples.

Changing interventions

Some of the changes were operational or procedural in nature. In Bangladesh, for example, the learning activities pointed to the need to build more capacity in the partner organisations, and to train boys and girls in life skills. In Nepal, we helped graduates from our life-skills courses to get organised (Box 4).

Other changes were more strategic. In Ghana, our initial attempts to empower girls were not as successful as we had hoped. It was only after we launched a mentoring programme for girls that it began to bring the desired results. This mentoring built on a Ghanaian tradition that says that the education of children is not just the responsibility of the parents but of the whole community (Box 5).

New audiences

A second type of change was in terms of the target groups we served. About halfway through the project in Nepal (Box 7), we realised that we were being less effective than expected because we had focused only on girls and young women. Girls themselves point-

Box 6. Expanding client groups and improving coordination in Nepal

The cycle of reflecting on our work and learning led to two big changes in Plan Nepal's activities: we broadened our work to cover boys as well as girls, and we created a network so our partners could coordinate their activities.

Broadening activities. We started running courses on life-skills for girls – covering things like health, sanitation, rights and protection against violence. But we came to realise it was not enough to talk only to the girls. We also needed to educate boys and young men, who are often the perpetrators of violence against girls. So we expanded the programme to include boys too. We started off with a modest pilot: just 18 courses for a total of 450 boys. We extended this to new locations using funding from other sources.

New networks. Many of our local partner organisations work on the same set of issues. We created networks in 20 districts in Nepal to help them exchange ideas and coordinate their work. Such networks were not envisaged in the original Girl Power Programme design; the need for them became clear only through the Learning Agenda component.

"The learning agenda has given enough flexibility to incorporate adaptations, which has positively contributed in achieving the Girl Power Programme goals", says Hem Poudyal, who manages the project in Plan Nepal.

Life skill education for the adolescent girls – before the boys were included

ed to the need to involve boys in the programme. We decided to adjust our approach by offering training and other services to both boys and girls.

Strengthening partner organisations

In some cases, we realised we needed to change something within our own organisations. We were able to draw on the Girl Power Programme's capacity-building component to do so. In Nepal, we reduced the number of organisations we worked with to eliminate overlap and overcome difficulties in monitoring. In Sierra Leone, collaboration with civil society organisations made it possible to expand the programme.

Changing the learning culture

The various organisations and local partners in the Girl Power Programme also changed as a result of the learning agenda. They became more aware of the need to learn from their success and mistakes, and institutionalised mechanisms to continue learning in the future. This continued and strengthened a trend that was already underway.

Scaling up

There were several examples of scaling up Girl Power initiatives. The behavioural change component in the Girl Power Programme of Nepal was scaled up to Parbat, Baglung and Bardia districts. In Sierra Leone, the Hope Children movement was scaled up to Moyamba district.

Recommendations

- A dedicated "space" for learning improves a project's quality. What takes place in this space will depend on the situation and the specific learning needs.

- Donors need to be flexible and allow for changing directions.

- The organisation must make a serious commitment to adopt a learning culture.

- Learning as part of an alliance can be challenging, but is very useful as it allows different organisations to learn from one another.