



OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

When children take the lead: 10 child participation approaches to tackle violence



CASE STUDY 3



3. Rise Up for Girls: Tackling child marriage and gender-based violence in Malawi and Guatemala

Rise Up enables girls, youth and women to identify their own problems so they can lead potential solutions through their own advocacy and mobilization strategies. In Malawi, young girls helped change national legislation by uniting their voices to outlaw child marriage and other forms of sexual violence. In Guatemala, a group of girls led the process of creating a national violence observatory centre to report cases of violence against girls and women. Rise Up's local partner organizations are the Girls' Empowerment Network (GENET) in Malawi, and Asociación Renacimiento in Guatemala.

WHY: Protecting girls in Malawi and Guatemala from child marriage and violence

Guatemala has one of the highest rates of pregnancy in girls aged 10 to 14 in Latin America: a direct consequence of sexual violence. According to official data from the country's National Statistics Institute, more than 74,000 babies were born to adolescent mothers in 2018, including 2,000 who were conceived as a result of the rape of girls under the age of 14.

Malawi is one of the countries with the highest levels of child marriage: almost half of all girls are married before the age of 18, putting them at greater risk of dropping out of school, domestic violence and the potentially life-threatening health consequences of early pregnancy. The country's landmark legislation, which bans child marriage, ensures that 2 million girls in the country can finish school, lift themselves out of poverty and marry when they want. Yet so much more needs to be done.

Rise Up believes that when girls can raise their voices and advocate for improved laws and policies and their implementation on the issues they prioritize, they help to highlight their own needs and position their voices at the centre of possible solutions. The Rise Up model enables adolescent girl leaders to drive sustainable change and tackle the legal, cultural, and structural obstacles that contribute to their high rates of forced marriage, early pregnancy, school dropout, gender-based violence and pervasive poverty.

WHAT: Banning traditional practices and protecting girls from violence

In both countries, local adult leaders and their organizations helped adolescent girls identify the issues they saw as the most urgent and supported them with relevant information to help them pursue their advocacy goals.

In 2015, young Malawian girls (aged 10 to 18) advocated successfully for a change in national legislation to outlaw child marriage, banning this

harmful traditional practice against girls in 184 communities. Today, 650 trained girl leaders are mobilizing over 10,000 young girls to advocate for an end to child marriage on the ground. Their strategy is based on working directly with village chiefs and traditional authorities to find local solutions together, so that the national law has a local impact by dissolving early marriages or setting up reporting and enforcement systems.

In Guatemala, a group of 30 young girls (also aged 10 to 18) led advocacy efforts for the creation of a municipal-level watchdog group to ensure the adequate reporting of – and response to – cases of sexual violence cases against girls and women, referring them to legal, psychological and medical help. These girls were trained on a Sexual Violence Protocol and, in turn, trained 150 more girls to identify, respond to and support survivors, and to prevent sexual violence in their communities. They investigated local violence rates using official facts and statistics to encourage decision-makers to approve a violence observatory centre. Consequently, they helped to train local authorities, teachers and parents on gender-based violence and effective responses to sexual violence.

HOW: Child-created, led and implemented mobilization and advocacy

Children were involved as leaders and decision-makers at every step of this process. In both countries, adolescent girls identified the problems to address, helped to devise advocacy strategies, and later implemented them with the support of their adult allies. Between 25 and 30 girl leaders per country either took the lead or participated in the advocacy planning and implementation stage.

Rise Up's model is to partner with, and build the capacity of, local organizations around girl-centred advocacy. The local partners develop a girl-centred or girl-led advocacy strategy and invite young girls

to go through an intense capacity building training programme on leadership development, mental health, public speaking, sexual violence, gender issues, advocacy and human rights.

Typically, this training programme consists of 12 sessions over six months. Girl leaders first reflect upon their own lives and their surroundings, and then map out their problems, identifying those that are the most pressing in their lives. Initial sessions focus on understanding the context, environment, and the root causes of these problems. The training encourages girls to find and focus on their objectives and identify the political changes that could help resolve an issue, starting from its root cause. Girl leaders are active participants in planning their advocacy strategies and creating a work plan to engage and convince other girls, as well as decision makers, local politicians, council members and others.

After the training, girls go back to their communities, advocate directly with decision makers and mobilize other girls. From then onwards, their model is built on girl-centred advocacy and mobilization, and a peer-to-peer approach.

Rise Up's adult leaders and their partner organizations know a great deal about the girl participants. Indeed, connection with the girls' ecosystem is a critical aspect of their model, given that the girls' training encourages them to reflect upon their context, reality, community and surroundings. It is understood that participation and advocacy strategies will vary depending on local context, and that the girls themselves are the ones who best understand that.

The peer-to-peer approach is critical. Rise Up's partner organizations first engage girl leaders, who then become the main entry point for new participants. The precise engagement strategies used

will depend on their creativity, but some of the most common are posters, marches, community theatre, puppet shows, speaking at school assemblies and community meetings, and the innovative use of social media, such as Whatsapp and SMS.

In both Malawi and Guatemala, the resources used most often for participation are offline, given the rural contexts and the lack of access to technology. Where the usage rate justifies it, girls will use Facebook and Whatsapp to communicate with and mobilize others.

RESULTS: Girls' stories are the main source of data

The data collected include a blend of qualitative and quantitative information. In both countries, girls realized that their own experiences — or the experiences of other girls they knew — were also their most powerful source of data. As a result, one of the most frequently used strategies was based on sharing their stories and experiences with decision

makers to bring them closer to the problems the girls face on a daily basis.

In this case, there is no need to share the participation results with the girls: instead, the girls share their results with adults and other girls and youth in their communities. Girls also evaluate their own work, as their training encourages them to appraise their achievements and processes, with the participation of the community. They are the ones who debrief, and they extract lessons learned that can be applied to future community mobilization and advocacy efforts.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND OUTCOMES: Banning harmful traditional practices and protecting girls from violence

Both experiences had clear advocacy goals: banning child marriage in Malawi and activating reporting and referral mechanisms for young victims of gender-based violence in Guatemala. Not only have these projects resulted in important achievements



from both participation experiences, but they have also enabled girls to be invited to, and involved in, decision-making spaces. In Malawi, girls lobbied directly with Members of Parliament, and in Guatemala girls advocated directly with traditional and elected community leaders and decision makers; the Guatemalan participants were also invited to participate in their local 'protection network' or community sexual violence watchdog groups.

By using their stories to engage decision makers and other adult stakeholders, girls in Guatemala achieved the creation of two violence observatory centres in San Juan Comalapa and San Martín Jilotepeque, where 700 adolescent girls and over 1,000 women have been protected after reporting different forms of violence. In Malawi, 184 villages have banned harmful traditional practices, including child marriage, thanks in part to the advocacy efforts of the girls.

The Rise Up! experiences from Malawi and Guatemala have shown outstanding participation outcomes, considering that – on average – most girls continue to engage in activism for at least three years after completing the initial training. Girl leaders continue to advocate with and engage other girls to ensure that the laws, policies or programmes they helped to create are implemented and funded, and that the impact reaches the most marginalized members of their communities.

CHALLENGES: Sharing power and being taken seriously

The main barrier to girls achieving change is the difficulty in convincing adults to share power spaces where girls can participate in decision-making processes. Girls have also pointed out that their opinions are not always taken seriously by authorities because of patriarchal and adult-centric practices, and that they are occasionally threatened and harassed by older women, men and boys in their communities.



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KEY TAKEAWAYS: Girls lead, decide and mobilize

Rise Up's model stands out for enabling girls to be the ultimate designers and leaders of their advocacy goals. The implementing organizations invest time and resources in encouraging girls to reflect upon their ecosystems and identify for themselves the issues of greatest importance for them and their peers. Both Rise Up and their partner organizations understand the value of identifying the drive and motivation for participation, and, most importantly, transferring power and control to children and adolescents so they can take the lead and become agents of change within their own lives.

The model also relies strongly on a peer-to-peer approach, understanding that only girls can transmit that level of stimulation to other girls. Rise Up truly empowers girl leaders so they can, in turn, empower their peers.

The training delivered by adults is thorough and comprehensive, and it understands the different areas of information girls need. It also displays understanding of the role adults need to play in such forms of participation: that of guiding and protecting girls throughout their process.

Finally, the model stands out for using girls' experiences as the main source of data for approaching authorities. It recognizes that quantitative data need to be complimented by qualitative, deep information with a strong emotional content to bridge the relationship between decision makers and adolescent girls.