

# **GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND ORGANISING IN WEST AFRICA**



***JUNE 2020***

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*This is a revised version of the “Acknowledgements” section of this report. In the initial release of the report, Plan International West and Central Africa failed to give an appropriate credit to the African women and girls whose expertise was fundamental to the quality of this study. We thank our online community that held us accountable for this mistake.*

The research study would not have been possible without the contributions of experts and resource persons from across the region, the majority of whom are women and girls from various African countries.

We would like to send a special thanks to:

- **Ten girl and young women activists** who participated in the 'design workshop' of this study, who shared their knowledge and expertise and had the chance to review and feed into the report. These girls and young women are from Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo and are activists and change makers. Their names are withheld to protect their identity.
- **Five supporters and chaperones** - Oluwatosin Akinloye, Obianuju Osude, Elizabeth Gbah-Johnson, Jeanne Manguet and Mélanie Gnandi who made the safe participation of the young activists possible.
- **Two facilitators from Benin and Liberia** - Yah Vallah Parwon, a Liberian Feminist and Pamela Akplogan, a Beninese Activist and the Youth Engagement Lead for Plan International WACA, who facilitated the human centred design workshop and in doing so elevated the voices of the 10 young women and girl activists.
- **Copa Research** whose experts Jamal Khadar, Richard Atkinson and Tom Marriage researched and wrote this report commissioned by Plan International West and Central Africa Regional Hub.

**Translation** of the research study in French was carried out by Aminata Diop, a Senegalese translator, and Illustrations and design were carried out by an African female illustrator who preferred not to be named. Special thanks to both.

**At the level of Plan International**, the research project was coordinated and edited by Lucy Barnett, Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Advisor at Plan International WACA Regional Hub. The research team gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the following offices and their staff: Plan International Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo. The production of this report would not have been possible without input from Aida Gueye Seydi, Aminata Niane, Amy Ashlee, Awa Faly Ba, Céline Thomas, Gabrielle Cole, Georgia Booth, Jaire Somo Moutcheu, Nastasia Thebaud-Bouillon Njenga, Madeleine Askham, Nora Lindström, and Pamela Akplogan.

The 2018 report, *Girls to the Front*: a snapshot of girl-led organising by FRIDA and Mamacash is a critical study into girl activism globally, and significantly informed this study.

Plan International is a lead organisation for the advancement and promotion of children and girls' rights. We are implementing innovative initiatives to support young activists to make their voices heard and to take an active part in all actions affecting their lives. Plan International wishes to use the results of this study, together with young activists of the region, to set up concrete actions aimed at strengthening their leadership and their strategic positioning both at regional level and in countries.

Dakar, 27 July 2020

# ACRONYMS

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| <b>FGM/C</b> | Female genital mutilation / cutting                          |
| <b>HCD</b>   | Human Centred Design   |
| <b>INGO</b>  | International non-government organisation                    |
| <b>NGO</b>   | Non-government organisation                                  |
| <b>WACA</b>  | West and Central Africa (regional hub of Plan International) |

# CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Executive Summary.....   | 6  |
| Recommendations.....   | 10 |
| 1. Study Objectives.....   | 14 |
| 1.1 Purpose.....   | 14 |
| 1.2 Scope.....   | 14 |
| 2. Methodology.....  | 16 |
| 2.1 Methodology Detail.....  | 17 |
| 2.2 Research Sample.....   | 18 |
| 2.3 Methodology Limitations.....   | 18 |
| 3. What is the landscape for girls' and young women's<br>activism and organising in West Africa?.....                    | 21 |
| 3.1 A lot of enthusiasm in the sector, but hard to<br>identify girl and youth-led groups.....                            | 21 |
| 3.2 Girls' and young women's activism in West<br>Africa is not well documented.....                                      | 22 |
| 3.3 Much of the visible adolescent girl organising<br>tends to be led by adults and formal<br>organisations.....         | 23 |
| 3.4 A spectrum from girl and youth-led to adult<br>led organising.....   | 24 |
| 3.5 Some girls' and young women's activism is<br>spontaneous while much of the visible activism is<br>NGO initiated..... | 25 |
| 3.6 Experts calling for more varied backgrounds<br>and perspectives to be sought out.....                                | 27 |
| 3.7 There is a need to explore activism at a<br>grassroots level.....  | 28 |
| 3.8 The specifics of West African girls' and<br>young women's activism are not well<br>understood.....                   | 30 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 4. What are the barriers that exist for girl and young women activists and groups in West Africa?.....                                   | 33 |
| 4.1 Girl and young women activists can feel they are not taken seriously and are hungry to play a real role on girls’ rights issues..... | 33 |
| 4.2 Girl and young women activists are passionate and do not always think about their own wellbeing.....                                 | 35 |
| 4.3 Girl and young women activists face frequent abuse, bullying and harassment.....   | 36 |
| 4.4 Planning for the future and maintaining involvement in activism over time is a challenge.....  | 38 |
| 4.5 Girl and young women activists want funding, but not just funding.....   | 38 |
| 4.6 Girl and young women activists are seeking to build their networks and movements.....  | 40 |
| 5. What are the learning opportunities for organisations like Plan International?.....   | 42 |
| 5.1 The risk of girl activism becoming a goal in and of itself.....  | 42 |
| 5.2 Working with others including men and boys.....  | 43 |
| 5.3 Measuring activists’ work.....   | 43 |
| 5.4 Ethical questions.....   | 44 |
| 5.5 Intersectionality and the risks of entrenching other forms of power beyond gender.....   | 45 |
| 6. Further Research and Recommendations.....   | 46 |
| 6.1 Areas for further research.....  | 46 |
| 6.2 Recommendations from Key Findings.....   | 48 |
| Appendix.....  | 50 |
| Research Sample.....   | 51 |
| Interviews.....  | 53 |
| Bibliography.....  | 54 |

---

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a dynamic and vibrant culture of girls' and young women's activism and organising in West Africa. Yet girls' and young women's activism in the region is not well documented or widely known about. Who are these activists, how are they organising, what drives them to demand change and what are the barriers they face? The intention of this research was to begin to answer these questions and identify opportunities for organisations like Plan International to support and catalyse girl and youth led movements in West and Central Africa.

In 2019, Plan International's West and Central Africa regional hub carried out the first phase of a study into girl and young women led activism in the region. Our intention was to begin to fill the knowledge gap on girls' and young women's activism and organising in West Africa.

The research was informed by reviewing existing literature and by speaking with experts: INGOs, civil society and funders working on youth engagement in the region. We interviewed civil society activists, some of whom were former girl activists. Most importantly we spoke to and explored the perspectives and experiences of 10 young women and girl activists from five countries in West Africa during a human centre design workshop.

**A note on terms:** the research uses the terms girls and young women to refer to a mixed age range of adolescent girls (10-19) and young women (15-24) in relation to their activism, organising and groups. When Plan International first conceived of the research, they aimed to focus on adolescent girls' activism in West Africa. However, as we got into the project we realised that the activists we were identifying were in an older sub-set of 15-24 and particularly 18 and over. Furthermore, we noted that in interviews and discussion, the term girl was used fluidly to include an older age range than just 'adolescent girls'. As a result of this and to be transparent about the group which we learnt about, Plan International extended the study to girls and young women, with a focus on the 15-24 age range.

## **The landscape for girls' and young women's activism and organising in West Africa**

There is an active girl, young women and youth activism and organising space in West Africa and INGOs and donors are increasingly interested in working with this space, but can struggle to identify young women and particularly adolescent girl activists and groups. They particularly struggle to find groups that are adolescent girl-led, at the grassroots, and away from urban centres.

The research identifies a spectrum of group and leadership structures, from groups established and led by girls and young women, to groups established by adults where girls and young women play varying leadership and decision-making roles. The report finds that girls' and young women's organising is seldom organic and their groups rarely exist without any external influence.

We spoke to girl and young women activists who were motivated to become activists from personal experiences or by role models. Mostly the research found activism and activist groups that have been instigated in some way, through involvement with INGOs, local organisations and initiatives such as debate clubs. Experts felt that expecting adolescent girls to spontaneously become activists is not realistic, particularly in a West African context where girls' and young women's exposure to activism is limited, and there can be barriers to them meeting and organising together.

Most of the girl and young women activists we spoke to were engaged in community work and advocacy activities on girls' rights issues. Gender based violence, child marriage, FGM/C, education and mentorship, menstrual health, feeding programmes, working with orphans and vulnerable children were the focuses of work of their work. However the extent to which this reflects a full range of issues that girls and young people want to work on, rather than simply a reflection of INGO and donor priorities in a landscape influenced by (adult) development issues is a question to interrogate.

This study and others find a correlation between socioeconomic advantage and higher education levels, and, with girls' and young women's activism. Higher education provides the space and connections for girls and young women to organise. Additionally, the girl and young women activists that an online search threw-up, use Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter to promote their work and connect with other activists. Yet because activists with access to social media are immediately more visible to the INGOs looking for them, the risk is that the activism that INGOs support reflects a small privileged subset. The online activist space in West Africa does not directly represent the voices of large numbers of girls and young women who are not online and do not access the organising opportunities that university or secondary education creates. The wider literature calls for an intersectional lens on girls' activism, acknowledging that girls and young women from poorer backgrounds, minority groups, those who identify as LGBTQI+, and those with a disability are all less likely to be involved in (visible) activism.

Although this research did not find many examples of grassroots or diverse activists, experts provided explanations for why these groups may be difficult to identify. In addition to a lack of online presence, grassroots activists are likely to work on a small scale and may purposefully be keeping a low profile while working on sensitive issues. Girls and young women, particularly those from rural contexts, may not identify as activists and promote themselves as such.

A major recommendation that comes out of the research is the need for an in-depth mapping of girl and young women activists and groups, including at the grassroots level, to really understand the scope of girls' and young women's activism and organising in the region. One of the limitations of this study is that it relies on online searches and talking to (mainly) adult specialists of youth engagement as well as former girl activists, about a phenomenon that is not always visible. The lack of visibility of much girl and youth activism is a challenge for INGOs looking to find girl activists and their groups.

## Barriers and pressing needs for girls and young women activists

The girl and young women activists we spoke to face a number of challenges including not being taken seriously and feeling taken advantage of by adults who they work with but don't give them sufficient space to make decisions or do meaningful work.

Those who attended the HCD workshop are passionate about their issues but busy and juggling many commitments. Burnout is a real risk for them. In addition, girl and young women activists deal with abuse and bullying – both online and offline. Many face threats and several have experienced physical violence. Some have informal mechanisms for dealing with these, but many do not, and most are working in contexts with very limited or non-existent structures and services to support them to stay safe.

Amongst the skills and learning that girl and young women activists seek from their peers and from adult activists and INGOs, is how to stay safe in their work. In addition, they struggle to identify and win funding opportunities and lack the know-how to navigate complex application processes.

**The girl and young women** activists face a number of challenges including not being taken seriously and feeling taken advantage of by adults who they work with but don't give them sufficient space to **make decisions** or do **meaningful work**

---

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings point to recommendations for Plan International and similarly-minded organisations, who are seeking to support girls' and young women's activism and girl-led groups in West Africa.

## **1. Create spaces for girls' and young women's activism and girl and young women's groups to operate in multiple forms, and ensure that these include diverse groups**

- Foster girls' and young women's activism and organising, acknowledging that it will be organised and structured in different ways. This means recognising that girl activism and organising is a spectrum, and that there are different ways in which girls and young women want to and do participate, lead and make decisions.
- Make space for the participation of diverse groups including less visible and offline groups. Without efforts to find the less visible groups, INGOs end up reinforcing privilege, and without taking a strong diversity and inclusion lens will fail to support the issues that marginalised groups would champion.
- Support dialogue between adult and younger activists and explore the ways in which young people can work with and benefit from the experience of adult and older activists and groups. This includes involving boys and men as partners, members and allies (which many girl and young women-led groups are doing in any case).

## **2. Acknowledge the role of INGOs and adult organisations in fostering girls' and young women's activism, and lean into this, while enabling activists and groups to retain their autonomy.**

- Acknowledge that adult led activism, INGOs and the broader development space are a key trigger and influence for girls' activism and organising in West African countries.
- Consider the ways Plan International and others can continue to support girls and young women to go on their own activism journey, while being aware of power dynamics and avoiding being top-down.
- Support girl and young women activists and their groups to choose which issues they want to work on, supporting them to do so and not imposing a donor's agenda or an INGO's own structures and priorities.
- Help girl and young women activists and their groups access funding, resources and training, but work with them in a way that supports them to retain their independence and guards their own activism space.



### **3. Carefully consider the different needs of girls and young women's groups, including that they may not want to operate as formal organisations but face barriers that hinder their work**

- Loosen red tape around funding applications, financial reporting and other aspects of grant management so as not to put a burden on girl and young women-led groups, and allow them to concentrate on the work they want to do.
- Consider the needs of girl and young women's groups and help girl and young women activists understand the importance of self-care: support them to stay safe and keep their peers safe.
- Critically, this also means organisations carefully approach and design partnerships with girls' and young women groups that they work with so that timing, ways of working and workload are realistic for the girl activists. This may mean choosing not to formally 'partner' but directing resources or mentoring girl and young women-led groups.

## Considerations for organisations supporting girls' and young women's activism to watch out for

The research also highlighted a few critical risks that require careful thought and mitigation when moving forward with girl and young women activists and their groups. When speaking with experts, we noted that there was limited conversation around the potential shortcomings of work conducted by girl and young women activists and the limitations of INGOs supporting this work. Here we highlight some of these risks:

- **The risk of girl and young women's activism becoming a goal in and of itself:** that girls' and young women's activism becomes a predesignated solution, without reflection of its actual outcomes, advantages and limitations as an approach and in addressing girls' rights issues.
- **The risk of not working with others:** that we may miss out on the skills and lessons of adult and older women activists, as well as the potential of boys and men as allies and co-drivers of change in girls' rights movements.
- **The current limits to measuring activism's impact:** there is limited evidence of how girl and young women-led groups use the funding and support they receive. It will be critical to rethink how organisations approach how they support groups to monitor progress and measure their impact, without this becoming a major burden on activist groups' time and resources.
- **Unanswered ethical questions:** How does a girl or youth led group maintain independence while partnering with or even just associating with an INGO? What are the specific safeguarding and risk implications of supporting and spotlighting girls' and young women's activism? How can INGOs support girls' and young women's groups whose attitudes to safety and risk are different from their own? To what extent does involvement with an INGO change the role young activists play in their community, the relationship they have with other stakeholders and their ability to effect change?
- **Intersectionality and the risk of entrenching other forms of power (beyond gender):** There is a risk that supporting visible girl and young women activists and groups (that are likely to be better educated, in urban centres, with access to the internet) may further entrench existing inequalities. Organisations need to consider that while they support and fuel the activism of girls and young women they identify, they need to take on an intersectional lens to ensure this includes diverse groups and voices.

# 1. STUDY OBJECTIVES

## 1.1 Purpose

The *Girls Get Equal* campaign is Plan International's global campaign aimed at promoting the role of youth-led movements in bringing about gender equality. It marks an important shift for Plan International, aiming to put power in the hands of young people and especially girls.

Plan International West and Central Africa (WACA) regional hub is seeking to evolve its approach to working with young people -focusing on adolescent girls and young women- who are organising to create change or influence decision-making.

Plan International WACA regional hub commissioned Copa Research to conduct research in order to build its understanding of how adolescent girls and young women activists are already organising in the region.

The project set out to begin to answer the following questions:

- What is the landscape for girls' and young women's activism and organising in West Africa?
- What are the barriers for girl and young women activists and groups in West Africa?
- What are the learning opportunities for organisations like Plan International?

## 1.2 Scope

The goal of this study and report is to provide an overview of the girls' and young women's activism space in West Africa. This is a critical step for Plan International and other actors building their understanding of this space and the girl and young women audience in the region. With an awareness of the scale of this challenge (a broad topic, a complex and diverse region, the difficulty of finding and speaking to activists on the ground), this research report should be viewed as one step in a longer learning journey – one that begins to provide answers, but also raises more targeted and nuanced questions that can be explored by further country-specific research (see methodology and limitations for more).

The research is primarily intended to inform Plan International's regional and country offices in the West and Central African region who are interested in working with and supporting youth and girl activists and their organisations. Learnings are also relevant for other organisations, INGOs and donors who are interested in supporting and multiplying the work of girl and young women activists and groups.

The goal of this study and report is to provide an overview of the **girls' and young women's** activism space in **West Africa**.



## 2. METHODOLOGY

This research used several methodologies. It was primarily desk based – reviewing existing literature and speaking to experts and stakeholders working in West Africa to give us a birds’ eye view of the landscape. However, this study also took advantage of a separate but related piece of research being carried out with girl and young women activists in the region. It draws on learning from a four-day Human Centred Design (HCD) workshop with girl and young women activists and members of girl-led groups from Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo. The workshop provided complementary qualitative insights, gathering the voices of a small sample of girl and young women activists from the region.

For this study, the main sources of data collection included:

- A desk review
- Remote interviews with Plan International internal staff working on girls’ rights and youth engagement
- Remote interviews with adult experts and stakeholders in girl and young women’s activism, youth engagement and the civil society space
- Remote interviews with women and adult young women activists

Complementary sources of data collection included:

- A participatory Human Centred Design workshop with girl and young women activists

## 2.1 Methodology Detail

### ***Desk review***

Desk research reviewed existing Plan International documentation on girl activism and reports from other organisations focused on youth, girl and young women's activism globally. The 2018 report *Girls to the Front* by FRIDA and Mamacash is a critical study into girl activism globally, and is one of few studies on the topic.

Desk research also included a light social media exploration of youth groups and girl groups on social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). This complementary approach was used to give us more of an idea of 'visible' girl and young women activists and groups in the region, and took a networked approach, starting from NGOs and known girl and young women activists and groups and searching through their social media for other organisations. This was qualitative and exploratory and did not involve using 3rd party software.

### ***Expert and stakeholder interviews***

- Remote interviews and informal discussions with Global, Regional and in-country Plan International staff whose work is focused on girls' rights and youth engagement
- Remote interviews with adult experts and advisors on youth engagement and civil society from the INGO space as well as former and current activists globally, regionally and in-country.

### ***Participatory workshop with girls and young women activists***

Plan International WACA hub is simultaneously exploring a methodology for working with girl activists to develop a girl-led research methodology. This process started with a 04 day HCD workshop with girl and young women activists and members of girl-led groups from Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo. The focus of this workshop was exploring a research methodology with activists as research users. However, it also allowed us to understand these activists more broadly – their aspirations, challenges and needs. Critically, this took place in a face-to-face workshop format which allowed for discussion and exploration of issues.

---

<sup>1</sup>See the 'Bibliography' in the Appendix Section for full details.

Plan International and Copa Research identified activists for the HCD workshop through local partners with links to the development and civil society space. We aimed to take a grassroots approach, finding activists through local community groups and organisations. Some were identified through their online presence or Plan International's contacts via civil society networks. The activists were aged 16-22 years old. Activists applied through an online application and the process was carefully managed by Plan International, prioritising keeping the young people safe, and not disrupting their schooling. The recruitment process prioritised a diverse group of girls and young women, including from a mix of urban and rural locations and ethnic groups, to ensure inclusion of minority groups where possible.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2 Research Sample

For desk research sources and expert and stakeholder interview details, please see the 'research sample' in the Appendix Section.

## 2.3 Methodology Limitations

There are a number of identified limitations which are important for framing the findings and recommendations included in this report.

### ***Research methodology***

- *Conducted at a distance from the region:* desk research and interviews were conducted remotely, with the exception of the workshop with 10 girl and young women activists
- *Some groups and views were left out:* more remote or informal groups with little or no online presence or connection to civil society actors were difficult to reach through the methodology.

### ***Limited literature***

- *Reliant on a small number of global studies:* Girl and youth activism is a relatively new research topic and not well documented. There is limited literature to draw upon, and particularly limited literature with a West or West and Central Africa regional focus. This means the desk research portion of the study was reliant on a smaller number of global research and reports on the topic including Plan International's own internal reports. The starting point for this study is then a more global or Western lens on the topic.

---

<sup>2</sup>Plan International WACA hub was conscious of including girl and young women activists with a range of marginalised identities. We asked in the application process but none of the participants self-identified as having a disability. We purposefully did not ask about sexual identities due to the risk to the young person in doing so in countries where homosexuality is illegal and a taboo.

### **West Africa region is vast and diverse**

- *A vast and diverse region:* The study had limited time and resources to focus on a vast region, when there are big differences across and within countries and cultures
- *Focus countries:* The report focused on girls' and young women's activism from 5 countries in West Africa: Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo
- *Data /research/contacts were not equally weighted by countries:* given the size, infrastructure and technology in Nigeria, it was the country that was more accessible and had most digital resources and examples of girl activism
- *Data/insight more biased to urban centres:* rather than representative of the regions of the country as a whole, given methodology limitations

### **Girl and young women activist sample not representative of each country or region as a whole**

- *A small sample:* primary research with activists was limited to one four-day workshop with 10 girl and young women activists
- *Privilege:* participants were on the whole relatively affluent, educated, connected and confident. This was partly due to intentional identification of activists for the HCD workshop, and partly due to difficulty in reaching more remote, informal groups or younger girls with the time and resources available.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup>Plan International intentionally recruited activists who were confident, articulate, English or French speakers and who would be comfortable in an international workshop in order to maximize their participation, added value for them, and learning from them.

# A note on the use of terms

## Girls' and young women's activism

The research uses the terms girls and young women to refer to a mixed age range of adolescent girls (10-19) and young women (15-24) in relation to their activism, organising and groups and in line with UNICEF definitions<sup>4</sup>.

When Plan International WACA hub first conceived of the research, they aimed to focus on adolescent girls' activism in West Africa. However, as we got into the project we realised that the activists we were identifying were mainly in an older sub-set of 15-24 and particularly 18 and over. Furthermore, we noted that in interviews and discussion, the term girl was used fluidly to include an older age range than just 'adolescent girls'. As a result of this and to be transparent about the group who we learnt about, Plan International have extended the study to girls and young women, with a focus on the 15-24 age range.

The term girls' and young women's activism is used broadly in this study to describe action and organising by adolescent girls and young women to create change in their communities and countries. This study has focused on girls and young women working to further gender equality and the rights of girls and young women.

## Girl and young women-led groups

When describing girl and young women's groups, 'girl-led' or 'young women-led' generally refers to a scenario where girls or young women make the decisions on all issues relating to their group. 'Girl-centred' refers to a scenario where work is implemented jointly with and for girls, but is led by adults<sup>5</sup>. However, our research found girl-led and girl-centred were used interchangeably. Additionally, there was little consensus around what 'girl-led' means. In our report we point out that adolescent girl-led groups (using the above definition) appear to be rare, and therefore a less binary, more fluid definition of girl-led might be more helpful when supporting and advocating for girls<sup>6</sup> and young women's activism.

---

<sup>4</sup>UNICEF: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/adolescents/overview/>

<sup>5</sup>FRIDA and MamaCash (2018) Girls to the Front: a snapshot of girl-led organising, p.6

<sup>6</sup>With and For Girls (2018) Girls, Agents of Change: Lessons from a collaborative approach to funding with and for girls, p.7

---

## 3. WHAT IS THE LANDSCAPE FOR GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND ORGANISING IN WEST AFRICA?

### 3.1 A lot of enthusiasm in the sector, but hard to identify girl and youth-led groups

There is an active and established youth development space in West Africa including youth-focused NGO programmes, youth parliaments and countless informal and formal youth groups. Many are focused on girls and young women.<sup>7</sup> However, many of these seem to be run in a top down way: for the youth, not by youth. Many are run by adults or have links to larger, more formal organisations.

In this study we encountered a great deal of enthusiasm for supporting youth and girl-led forms of activism, however there was a sense amongst experts that the extent of girl-led groups where girls take sole leadership is exaggerated.

Numerous established adult organisations and INGOs including Plan International are trying to identify groups that are girl-led (rather than adult-led), find activists who are adolescent girls (not young adults) and understand what support they are seeking.

*“The fund was set up to support girl-led groups, but if we look at the applications it is primarily ‘girl-centred’ groups or organisations that themselves offer support to ‘girl-led’ [...]. We’re still finding ways to identify and work directly with adolescent ‘girl-led’ groups.”*

*-(Consultant at fund focused on adolescent girls, West African Region)*

#### **Recommendation**

Moves to encourage more meaningful youth leadership in development and support youth-led organising is shared by several actors in this space, yet questions remain about how widespread ‘girl-led activism’ is in West African countries, where desk research revealed only a handful of documented examples. Further detailed research on the ground is required to determine the scale of girl-led organising in West African countries.

---

<sup>7</sup>Anecdotally, a search for the term ‘girl’ on social media accounts of INGOs turned up many smaller organisations focused on girls

## 3.2 Girls' and young women's activism in West Africa is not well documented

Most of the existing research on girl-led organising and activism focuses on activism at the global level. Few West or West and Central African case studies feature in global reports.

Experts we spoke to had anecdotal examples of girls' and young women's activism in West African countries, and a strong sense that there were girl-led organisations responding to local issues. However, there was limited documentation of these and the scale and nature of girl and young women's activism and organising taking place is unknown, especially at the grassroots level.

*“There is a real need for mapping exercises to understand which collectives are already there below the radar and what course of action they would like to take.”*  
(Youth Engagement Director, INGO, West African Region)

From our primary research with girl and young women activists, we learned that many are making efforts to share their work through social media platforms. However, information available online was limited, fragmented and heavily skewed towards those with better digital access and skills.

### **Recommendation**

There is a need for a comprehensive and detailed mapping of girls' and young women's activism in West African countries. This would help organisations seeking to support and encourage girls' and young women's activism to learn more about the needs and priorities of activists and target their efforts. In our small sample, this is something external experts and internal Plan International stakeholders were specifically asking for.

Most of the existing research on girl-led organising and activism focuses on activism at the global level

## 3.3 Much of the visible adolescent girl organising tends to be led by adults and formal organisations

There is limited youth and girl leadership amongst the more visible groups in activist spaces. Unsurprisingly, it is formal groups or established young adult activists that tend to be visible and documented, rather than grassroots or informal groups set up and led by young women or adolescent girls. These more visible groups tend to have more resources, skills and contacts.

While there is a real ambition to work with adolescent girls, some organisations concede that current members of their initiatives tend to be in an older age bracket. Additionally, much youth involvement is mediated or run by adults and those from formal organisations.

*“When you look at Girl Activism across the region, it is often monitored by older women or INGOs. There’s a need for girls to see activism in the light of responding to their own issues, not just in the service of others” (Youth Engagement Director, INGO, West African Region)*

This reflects the experiences of the girls and young women activists at the HCD workshop who told us about the lack of opportunities for meaningful participation or leadership.

*“People can use us or ask us to change our work for their gain. We want to be heard and to be able to contribute our ideas.”*  
*-(Young Woman Activist, 21, Workshop)*

Experts cite a number of reasons for not including adolescent girls or young women: the difficulty in finding this audience, the lack of time and space to participate in activism, and the barriers this audience faces in finding meaningful opportunities to lead or to participate in different ways.

### **Recommendation**

Organisations interested in working with girl and young women activists need to consider how far their programmes or initiatives respond to what these groups want and how they can create the right spaces to allow girls’ and young women’s decision making and leadership in their structures.

---

<sup>8</sup>From desk research / social media search: Brief descriptions of groups of Facebook profiles, the occasional photo or post from activities and organising but little else. High profile activists had more detail, but there is very little documented work from others.

## 3.4 A spectrum from girl and youth-led to adult led organising

While it is important to note the lack of girl and youth leadership, there is also a need to more closely examine the definition of young women or girl-led. During our research we found girls can be active within organisations in many different ways. While some were seeking leadership opportunities, others played active and meaningful roles in adult-led organisations. Some had received training and experience within adult-led organisations leading them to start their own initiatives.

We saw a few different ways in which girls and young women were involved in organisations:

- Organisations that were started by, directed by and run by adults, but focused on girls' and young women's issues and inclusive of them
- Organisations that were started and run by adults where girls and young women had very active roles in the day-to-day organising of the group
- Organisations that were started by adults, but directed and run by girls and young women
- Organisations started, directed and run by girls or young women, often less formal or small in size and resources

### ***Recommendation***

Conceiving of girls' and young women's activism as either girl-led or not girl-led may mean interested organisations miss out on the valuable role that adults (especially older women activists) can play to support girl and young women activists. It is critical that girls and young women are given the space to lead and create, however by too strongly focusing on the requirement for groups to be 'girl-led', there is a risk of missing out on opportunities to support girl or young women activists, or of placing an unrealistic expectation on them to fully lead organisations.



### 3.5 Some girls' and young women's activism is spontaneous while much of the visible activism is NGO initiated

Girls and young women had a range of motivations for being involved in activism. Many were inspired by family members who were involved in social justice, motivated by a personal experience, or gained experience in debate clubs in school or local youth initiatives.

*"It was natural for me. I was the valedictorian at school. I found others at school who had a lot to say, who needed to express themselves"*  
-(Young Woman Activist, 19, Workshop)

*"It started with my mother, women would come with their problems to the front room and she would talk to them. They would always leave smiling"*  
-(Young Woman Activist, 18, Workshop).

Some experts had anecdotal examples of spontaneous or 'organic' forms of activism where girls and young women have little involvement with formal organisations. However, experts agree that most girls' and young women's activism is instigated: encouraged by INGOs, local organisations and community structures seeking to foster girl and youth-led development.

We acknowledge the natural limitation of this research methodology which was not at the grassroots level and the limited mapping of informal or grassroots girl organisations. However, experts also explained that there was a tendency to underplay the role of formal organisations in girls' and young women's activism.

Experts told us that there is a risk that by emphasising 'organic' activism too strongly, we may underplay the challenges and barriers of girls and young women getting involved in activism without the support or encouragement of others. Several experts we spoke to believe that it is unrealistic to expect adolescent girls to take up activism without support, especially those at the local grassroots level who may have more limited freedom to meet, and limited exposure to activism.

*"We cannot expect girls in more marginalised rural communities to spontaneously become activists, it's a longer journey."*  
-(Founder of organisation that supports grassroots activism, West African Region)

“Many girls don’t have a mentor, and safe spaces to interact with friends can be a rare commodity. Girls interacting with girls can be looked down upon in society. The very basis of girls organising is itself a restricted space.”

-(Founder of organization that supports grassroots girls’ activism, West African Region)

Many pointed to the role of established organisations as an important contributor to girl and young women’s activism. Often, we heard of girls that began their journeys after engagements with an INGO, but consequently took up their own path or began their own initiative. A number of the girl activists identified by FRIDA and MamaCash in *Girls to the Front* started their own groups after being part of more formal initiatives.<sup>9</sup>

However, experts also acknowledge the risks of INGOs and formal organisations encouraging girl and young women’s activism: that it may be too ‘top down’ and too prescriptive in encouraging which issues and the actions girl activists should take.

### **Recommendation**

Supporting and facilitating activism requires different strategies depending on the context:

- Finding girl and young women-led groups and activists that have started their work ‘organically’ and supporting them with their current aims and activities on their terms
- Supporting girls’ and young women to start organising around issues which are important to them. It’s critical this is not done in a top down way. This means 1) starting small: supporting girls and young women with the space to meet and build their social agency, and 2) thinking beyond activism as the only means of change: providing support and tools for girls and young women to decide on which issues and which actions, and which doesn’t assume activism is the only way to engage with issues.

Many pointed to the role of established organisations as an important contributor to girl and young women’s activism

---

<sup>9</sup>FRIDA and MamaCash (2018) *Girls to the Front*, p.16: “Some girls’ initiatives are born from the girls’ previous involvement as beneficiaries in larger, more established organisations, where they would have been encouraged and supported to lead their own activities.”

## 3.6 Experts calling for more varied backgrounds and perspectives to be sought out

It is clear that the majority of visible girl and young women activists i.e. those working in the spotlight of civil society spaces, come from more privileged backgrounds. They are often better educated, located in cities and socioeconomically advantaged.

There is a concern amongst experts that girls and young women who are most marginalised are not well represented amongst girl and young women activists and groups. The desk research noted a lack of 'intersectional' focus in girls' and young women's activism i.e. that those from poorer backgrounds, minority groups, those who are LGBTQI+ and young people with disabilities are all less likely to be involved in activism. Experts call for more of an intersectional focus: recognising the ways that different discriminations overlap, beyond gender and age.

Related to this is the risk that INGOs may end up giving a platform to girls and young women activists who are more privileged and overlook the voices of many others. In order to include marginalised girls and young women, it is necessary to explore and support less visible forms of activism taking place in multiple spaces.

### ***Recommendation***

If INGOs and organisations do not make efforts to seek out girl and young women activists from varied backgrounds, the risk is that their efforts to support these groups will reinforce existing social hierarchies and not include those from a more marginalised groups

This critique likely represents a broader concern in activism and civil society rather than just a shortcoming of girls' or young women's activism. However, if the goal is to put the power and resources in the hands of a wide range of girls and young women, it is critical that organisations take an intersectional lens to identifying those they work with.



## 3.7 There is a need to explore activism at a grassroots level

Experts agree that there is a need to include underrepresented voices and move beyond those that are currently visible in activism.

However, questions remain about how much and what kinds of girls' and young women's activism are taking place at a less visible, grassroots level. Is girls' and young women's activism inherently linked to privilege, or have INGOs and adult organisations simply not made enough efforts to find and give a platform to less privileged girls?

Some reports show that there is a high correlation between activism and higher education<sup>10</sup> - suggesting that girls' and young women's activism is inherently linked to privilege. Higher education provides girls and young women with opportunities, connections to other girls and encouragement to explore and learn. FRIDA and MamaCash found that girl organisations founded by girls in higher education, showed more agency and independence than those from girls still attending secondary school.<sup>11</sup>

This was reflected in the search and recruitment of girl and young women activists for the HCD workshop linked to this study. Girls under 18 and those from more remote areas lacked the time and autonomy or permission to participate in activism due to school and family commitments and the restrictions cultural and social norms can place on them.

On the other hand, some experts believe girls' and young women's activism is taking place at a grassroots level, but it is simply not documented. This is likely due to a variety of reasons: grassroots activists don't broadcast their work online particularly where access to internet is low and using social media isn't the norm; their activism takes place on a small scale away from public spaces; activists are working covertly on sensitive issues and don't want to be identified. Furthermore, grassroots activists may not identify their activity as 'activism' when they are carrying out small and low key activities eg. holding local meetings, facilitating discussions, speaking to decision makers on local issues.

---

<sup>10</sup>FRIDA and MamaCash (2018) Girls to the Front, p.14

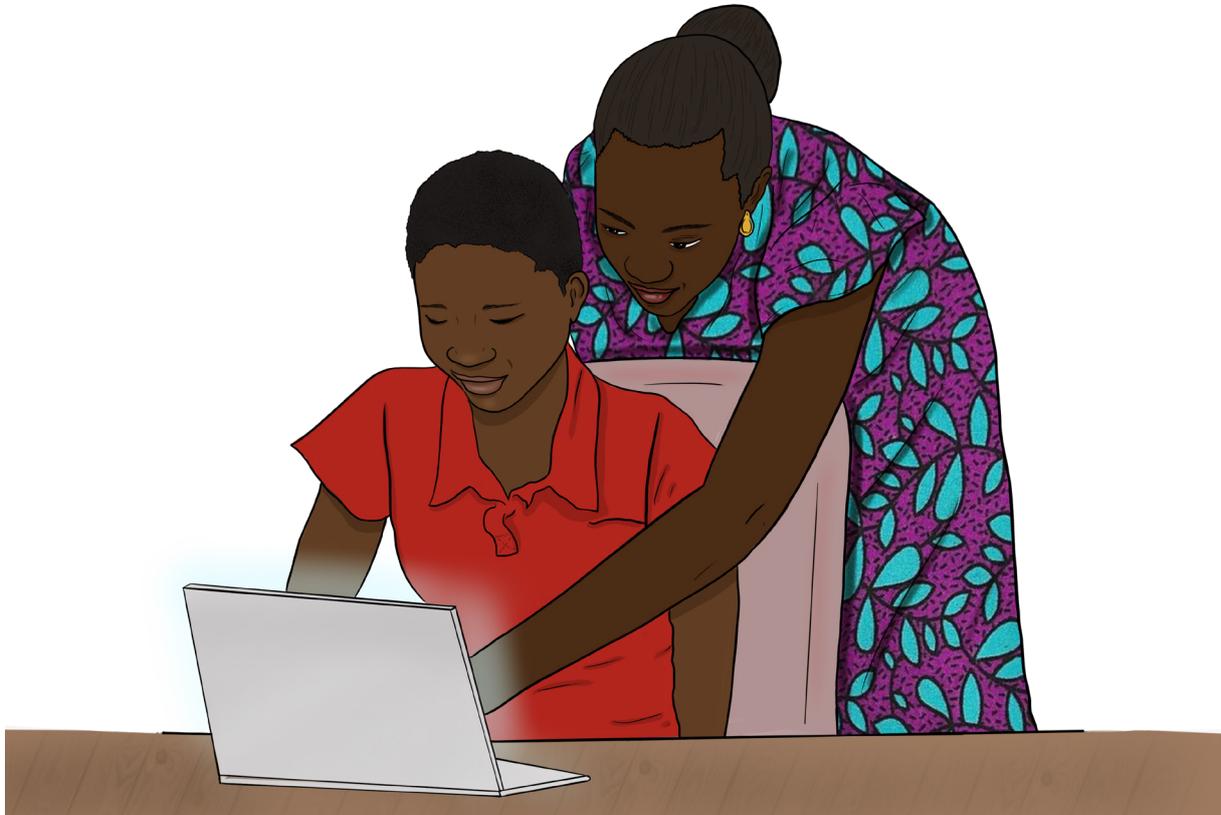
<sup>11</sup>FRIDA and MamaCash (2018) Girls to the Front, p.14

## **Recommendation**

This reaffirms the need for a more comprehensive and detailed mapping of activism in West Africa, and in particular to explore girls' and young women's organising at a grassroots level: to understand how widespread the activity is, how it plays out differently to more visible activism, and understand the dynamics for those with less of a platform.

The answer to the question of what is taking place below the radar will determine the approaches used to support more diverse girls' and young women's activism: is it a case of finding and spotlighting girls and young women who are organising at grassroots level or of rethinking the definition of activism and organising altogether?

Equally, if there are strong links between education level and girls' and young women's activism, for example, organisations can foster this in their initiatives.



## 3.8 The specifics of West African girls' and young women's activism are not well understood

Experts were conscious that more effort is needed to understand the specific regional or country contexts of girls' and young women's activism and organising and of how activism generally may be expressed differently in a West African context.

*"We need to look at different activism models across the region. Sometimes it's about marching and activism [...] but in other places it's [...] online. For example in Nigeria, [there are] no demonstrations, but Nigerians are very active online with human rights."*

*-(Youth Engagement Director, INGO, West African Region)*

Experts in this research were interested in understanding how girl and young women's activism plays out locally:

- How much is it driven by the local context and issues vs 'external forces' including seeing what is going on in activism at global level?
- Local expressions of activism: what is specifically 'West African' or Togolese, Guinean, Liberian, Senegalese or Nigerian about the way girl activists operate? How does this differ across cultures and by socioeconomic and political contexts?

This study did not have the scope or resources to address these questions in full, or examine the country specific contexts. While fully pulling apart global versus West African notions of girl activism will require further research, we identified some early areas to explore:

*Narrow areas of focus:* girls' and young women's activism in the region clusters around a small number of established issues. We heard a lot about child marriage, FGM/C and other harmful practices, gender based violence, access to education, mentorship, menstrual health, feeding programmes, working with infants and vulnerable groups.

Some experts suggested that these specific areas of interest could be a result of funding flows and external influences in the development and (adult) activist sphere, and not necessarily a reflection of the full range of issues which girls and young women are interested in and affected by. It is likely that established development themes are picked-up and to various degrees, by girls and young women activists as they see and engage with the international development space. The risk is these may be crowding out other important issues for girls and young women in West Africa.

Expressions of activism: One of the main themes from this study is how we can define and understand girls' and young women's activism. There's indication that activism in West Africa may be enacted by different expressions of activism and that it may be less loud or antagonistic than other forms of activism.

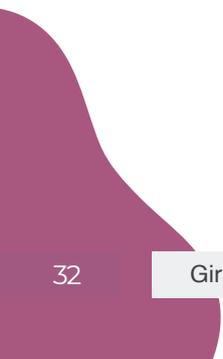
*"We as NGOs may be bringing our own ideas of what activism is [...] We're so focused on more extreme or obvious activism that we miss out on their work, and they do not define themselves as activists. We need to open the definition"*  
-(Youth Engagement Director, INGO, West African Region).

### **Recommendation**

In light of West African girl activism being not well understood, there is a need to:

- More closely examine the drivers and influences on girl and young women's activism and organising in the region and at a country level
- Be open to the kinds of issues girl activists are interested in, that go beyond INGO interests and funding flows, and support girls and young women to identify these.
- Take an open minded approach to how models of activism may differ to other regions i.e. challenge our assumptions about what types of behaviours constitute 'activism'
- Consider the various drivers and shapers of activism within countries such as culture, social norms, economics, politics and civil society spaces.

Activism in West Africa may be enacted by different expressions of activism and may be less loud or antagonistic than other forms of activism



---

## 4. WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS THAT EXIST FOR GIRL AND YOUNG WOMEN ACTIVISTS AND GROUPS IN WEST AFRICA?

### 4.1 Girl and young women activists can feel they are not taken seriously and are hungry to play a real role on girls' rights issues

Girls and young women activists often feel undervalued, including by adults in the activist and development spheres. The girl and young women activists we spoke to felt they are viewed by others' as too young and inexperienced, and feel they are not taken seriously.

*"They say that we are sexist and exaggerate and that we are victimising ourselves"*  
*-(Young Woman Activist, 19, Workshop)*

One of their frustrations was being celebrated without receiving meaningful or practical support. They feel that others can use them for their own gains, especially politicians who can piggy back off activists' work or participate in tokenistic ways.

*"Government can support our idea but not follow through or stick to the idea themselves"* (Young Woman Activist, 22, Workshop)

Adult activists were also called out as sometimes acting as a barrier to girls' and young women's involvement. Many girl and young women activists had negative experiences of working with more established women activists.

*"She pretended to care but she told me that while I worked with her my organisation I didn't exist"* (Young Woman Activist, 22, Workshop)

In the HCD workshop we found that girl and young women activists are passionate about playing more leading and meaningful roles on girls' issues, beyond just contributing ideas to actually developing their own ideas. They are open to working with others including INGOs and established organisations but want space to contribute ideas and recognition for their work.

Many are also actively seeking out mentorship and advice from older activists or stakeholders from more established organisations, and are looking for positive relations and support from adult activists.

*“I found my mentor on Facebook, we have a good connection and I can reach out to her anytime”*  
*-(Young Woman Activist, 22, Workshop)*

### **Recommendation**

Some experts referenced examples where younger activists learned from and co-opted strategies of older groups for their own issues. There is a clear need to encourage dialogue between generations and an opportunity for enabling space for younger activists to lead, while building on the experience of older activists.

**They are open to working with others but want space to contribute ideas and recognition for their work**

## 4.2 Girl and young women activists are passionate and do not always think about their own wellbeing

The girl and young women activists we met and spoke to were committed and passionate. They saw their roles as activists or change makers as more than a job, for them it is a calling or a lifestyle.

However, there's much more going on in their lives: many were also running small businesses, artists, studying and pursuing careers. Activism is often just one of the many commitments in their lives and often takes place in their spare time outside of school, university, work or both.

*"I look at my schedule to see when I can find time to fight for women's rights"*  
(Young Woman Activist, 18, Workshop)

*"My mum says she can never keep up with all of my activities."* (Young Woman Activist, 19, Workshop)

Girl and young women activists are busy and many are overstretched. Their ambition and passion for activism can come at a cost of their own well-being and self-care. The risk of burnout is apparent and documented in other studies.

*"You can find that you're fighting for girls' education but don't even have time to study yourself, you're neglecting your own education."*  
-(Young Woman Activist, 22, Workshop)

### **Recommendation**

It is critical that organisations working with girls and young women activists help them to understand the importance of self-care. This also means organisations should be careful in designing and making asks from activists who they want to engage with. Working supportively with girl and young women activists and groups must mean making it easy for them to participate, at flexible times that suit them and making interactions time appropriate and meaningful.

## 4.3 Girl and young women activists face frequent abuse, bullying and harassment

The abuse and harassment that girls and young women face for standing up for their and others' rights is well documented. Yet still in our discussions with activists we found the backlash and risks that they face in their work is striking.

Many spoke about online abuse, threats and risks to their physical safety. Online abuse on social media, where girls and young women were speaking out, was especially prevalent. While many were determined to not let it discourage their work, some activists were clearly effected by abuse they had received, and had changed their behaviour as a result, such as limiting the number of online posts they make, not reading replies.

*"People would ask me 'are you cut', I stopped reading the comments"*  
*-(Young Woman Activist that works to tackle FGM, 21, Workshop)*

Girl and young women activists told us about the physical risks they faced. Those working in communities has sometimes received threats and had to leave areas quickly due to risks. Many had techniques for staying safe when in communities - communicating with local officials, leaders and their peers, working and travelling in pairs or groups. In our small sample of 10 we saw mixed attitudes to risk: many were prepared to continue to put themselves at risk for their work.

Not all girl and young women activists demonstrated a good understanding of how to protect themselves and stay safe online. In some cases, there was evidence that their work may also be putting those they are trying to help at risk, for example incidences where they were sharing girls' personal stories through media and social media in sensitive and potentially violent situations.

*"I remember when I was younger, I shared a story of two people who had a dispute in the community, as a result they were badly beaten."  
-(Former Girl Activist, West and Central African Region)*

### **Recommendation**

For organisations intending to support girls and young women activists, this points to a clear need - help them to stay safe, and help them keep the girls and other groups they work with to stay safe. It also raises difficult questions about larger in the spotlight organisations working with them - if organisations highlight girl and young women activists' activities, how do they avoid subjecting these activists to backlash?

Specifically, there was a compelling request to help young activists stay safe in their work and signpost them to help and advice if they feel at risk.

## 4.4 Planning for the future and maintaining involvement in activism over time is a challenge

One of the concerns that girl and young women activists expressed was around how they might balance activism with other commitments and life changes in the future. This is also something former or older activists discussed with us and is referenced in other studies - activists can often struggle to balance family life with their work, and in some cases marriage can act as a barrier to activism<sup>12</sup>.

Organisations working with activists and girl-led groups expressed a parallel concern. As activists get older, and organisations seek to fund adolescent girls, what role exists for older activists? What is the best way to maintain their involvement while also maintaining space for younger activists?

### ***Recommendation***

For organisations supporting girl and young women-led groups, there is a need to consider the longer-term roles of the girls involved as they transition into adulthood. Adult activists could transition into mentoring younger activists, but encouraging older activists to take less prominent roles after years of building up their experience may be a challenge.

## 4.5 Girl and young women activists want funding, but not just funding

Funding is a major challenge for girl and young women activists and groups. This is documented in the literature on girl activism<sup>13</sup> as well as a finding of this study. Many of the conversations about the different kinds of support girl and young women activists were interested in and looking for came back to resources and money.

Girl and young women activists and their groups find it difficult to access funding for a range of reasons. Some identified the formal documentation and other requirements to apply for funding as too demanding and strict for their groups. The fact that so few girls' and young women's groups are formally registered is a barrier for them even applying for funds. This is recognised by some INGOs and reflects conversations we had with organisations seeking to fund girls' groups by relaxing application criteria so that girl groups could more easily apply.

---

<sup>12</sup>FRIDA and MamaCash (2018) *Girls to the Front*, p.14

<sup>13</sup>With and for Girls (2018) *Girls, The Agents of Change: Lessons from a collaborative approach to funding with and for girls*

Many activists talked about connections and awareness being a major barrier - it's about who you know and knowing where to look. This is reflected in our conversation with an adolescent girls' fund. They often struggled to find more grassroots groups to apply, and were funding the same groups frequently.

While funding is important, it's certainly not the only need or challenge girl and young women activists face. Capacity and skills building opportunities came up frequently when girls and young women activists spoke about what they and their groups need. Young activists are eager to get better at what they do and many understand that to play a leading role they need more opportunities to learn.

### ***Recommendation***

Accessing funding is currently a significant challenge for girl groups. Desk research suggests that making funding more accessible means: opening up applications to more groups by lowering the income threshold, reducing the application requirements, broadening the languages that applications are written in, and removing jargon<sup>14</sup>. Ultimately this means directing more support, training and resources towards existing groups and providing flexible funding but more than just funding<sup>15</sup>.

It is also critical to consider that as approaches to funding girls' and young women's groups are in early stages, there is limited understanding of how effective this funding might be. Organisations should consider simple ways for tracking and measuring how funding is used, and its impact without imposing significant monitoring and reporting requirements on girls' and young women's groups.

**Accessing funding is currently a significant challenge for girl groups**

---

<sup>14</sup>As above  
<sup>15</sup>Plan International (2018) Powering the Movement Strategy: Youth-Led Collective Action Strategy (2018-2025)

## 4.6 Girl and young women activists are seeking to build their networks and movements

Connecting and networking is a priority for the girl and young women activists and groups that participated in the HCD workshop. At a basic level this can be about connecting with other girls and young people to socialise and discuss issues which jointly affect them. At a more advanced level this is about sharing resources with other groups, accessing opportunities and generating members for their movements.

Girls and young women activists also shared examples of the ways they already connect with their peers. When a group wants to promote an issue, other groups in their network will share with their followers on social media such as Facebook or WhatsApp to raise awareness and build momentum. The girls and young women activists we spoke to are seeking ways to enhance these connections and brought up the idea of a social media workspace for activists.

While for the most part girls and young women activists in the workshop discussed the benefits of social media, a small number were aware of its limitations in reaching a wider audience. This is a critical point in West African countries where relatively few girls and young people have access to personal devices or to the internet to go online<sup>16</sup>.

*“Digital can’t reach everyone - some people need physical contact”*

*-(Young Woman Activist, 21, Workshop)*

*“You need to use tech to tell girls’ stories, even when they don’t have access”*

*-(Young Woman Activist, 19, Workshop)*

Girl and young women activists are still seeking ways to enhance their connections, share information and tell stories, and suggested the idea of a social media work space for activists. Some were interested in training to increase their skills around social media and other digital tools to increasing their effectivity and reach. There was an interest in finding ways to use the benefits of technology to help those who have more restricted access to the internet and technology.

---

<sup>16</sup>Access to the internet is particularly low in parts of West Africa with individual access at 8% in Liberia, 12% in Togo, 18% in Guinea. It is notably higher in Senegal (46%) and Nigeria (42%) , based on 2017 data from the International Telecommunication Union, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

Access for women and girls, including those in rural locations is significantly lower. Plan International’s own research has shown that in Liberia, many girls have significantly lower access to the internet than boys.

It's important to note that girl and young women activists don't just want to network with peers, but have a desire to network up (to large organisations and established activists), across (to share resources and knowledge with other groups) and down - they want other girls and young women to be part of their network, to lift them up and help them find their voices.

It was also clear that despite an eagerness to connect, many activists and girls' and young women's groups weren't always aware of others doing similar work. Some of the experts from organisations that we spoke to as part of this research, saw this as the central role they can play in supporting activists - energising activism by acting as connectors and facilitators of girl groups<sup>17</sup>.

*"We see ourselves as a convenor of allies. We choreograph girls and groups that would like to come together."*

*-(Founder of organisation that supports grassroots girl activists)*

### **Recommendation**

The importance of developing movements and networks for girl and young women activists is documented in previous Plan International research including from other regions<sup>18</sup>. This was reflected in this study – there was evidence of girl and young women activists operating in informal, loosely formed networks and some describing their group or aims as a 'movement'.

Given the limited scope of this study, further research is needed to explore:

- How different girl and young women activists and groups define networks and movements
- Mapping the informal networks and movements that exist, how they operate, and how approaches differ<sup>19</sup>
- Identify key entry points in these networks and movements: where organisations already have relationships which can be leveraged to grow and widen their reach
- Examine the role of social media and digital tools to promote networks and movements, while acknowledging their limitations eg. due to accessibility in the West Africa context.

---

<sup>17</sup>Plan International: Champions of Change Gender Transformative Advocacy Model

<sup>18</sup>Plan International: Powering the Movement, p.8

<sup>19</sup>In this research we found some were quite sophisticated and more flexible networks than others. Some groups were more intentional and strategic with the use of their network and their organising e.g. a loose network or community of smaller groups or individuals that would come together (online and in person) to build momentum

## 5. WHAT ARE THE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ORGANISATIONS LIKE PLAN INTERNATIONAL?

During interviews with experts, there was a lot of enthusiasm for adolescent girls' activism, and some spontaneous discussion of the value of promoting girls' and young women's activism. However, discussion on the potential risks and shortcomings of girl activism was notably limited. There was very limited conversation from experts around the potential shortcomings of work conducted by girl and young activists and the challenges for INGOs and other organisations in supporting this work. Where it did surface, it focused on how activists may be exposed to risk, harassment or were risking their wellbeing, rather than the limitations of girl and young women's activism itself.

### 5.1 The risk of girl activism becoming a goal in and of itself

There was limited discussion of the aims and potential benefits of girls' and young women's activism, such as specific development outcomes or increased agency for girl-led groups. With a great deal of momentum and excitement in the space, but limited discussion and evidence of its outcomes, there is a risk that promoting girl activism becomes an intrinsic goal in itself. It is critical that there is constant reflection on what the benefits of girls' and young women's activism are in general as an approach, and what the benefits are of their organising when trying to solve a specific girls' rights issues.



## 5.2 Working with others including men and boys

Experts agree it is important to protect spaces for adolescent girls to lead in order to work around the ageism and misogyny which may limit their ability to make decisions for themselves and their communities. However, to what extent does this approach present limitations? Many of the girl and young women activists we spoke to acknowledged that while they felt they understood the issues and solutions well, they still had gaps in their knowledge and experience. To what extent should girl and young women activists be working with adults and other development experts and stakeholders to fill these gaps?

There is also the question of boys and men. The need for their participation is well documented<sup>20</sup> and this was referenced continually in discussions. However, most experts and organisations we spoke to were largely focused on girls and young women (some specifically on adolescent girls), and prioritised girls or girl and young women-led spaces over mixed youth led-spaces. Meanwhile, many of the girls and young women activists we spoke to were working directly with boys and young men either in their groups or as allies. This is a gap to be explored.

## 5.3 Measuring activists' work

This remains a challenge for organisations seeking to fund and support girls' and young women's activism. Funding organisations we spoke to often faced difficulties deciding what criteria they apply when choosing which projects to support, and what criteria to use when assessing how effective their investment has been. This is likely down to a tension between how girl and young women activists likely perceive success and desired outcomes<sup>21</sup> versus those of established or international organisations. Linked to this, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how different girl and young women-led groups define their own success (tangible and intangible) and using this to develop more participatory girl-led ways of monitoring and measuring the impact of girl and young women activists' work.

---

<sup>20</sup>Plan International Powering the Movement, p.8; Slegh, H.; Barker, G.; Kimonyo, A.; Ndolimana, P. and Bannerman, M. (2013) "I can do Women's Work": Reflections on Engaging Men as Allies in Women's Economic Empowerment in Rwanda', *Gender and Development* 21.1: 15–30. Cited by Edström and Shahrokhi p. 33.

There is very limited research on men and boys in terms of them being allies in activist spaces and a literature review reveals a knowledge gap on how to engage them in activist activities for girls' rights

<sup>21</sup>Goals or ideas of success that the activists talked about included access to new spaces, participation in processes, fixes for problems for their target groups.

## 5.4 Ethical questions

There is some evidence<sup>22</sup> that girl-led groups do not want to formalise and scale in the way that INGOs might desire them to in order to work with them. Equally, some young activists or groups may be working on contentious issues that mean that while they are seeking specific technical or financial support, they do not want to be thrust into the spotlight.

This raises important questions for both INGOs and girls' and young women's groups to grapple with: How do they guard against girl and young women activists becoming too much on the inside and losing their independence? To what extent does involvement with an INGO change the role activists play in their community, the relationship they have with other stakeholders and their ability to effect change? What are the specific safeguarding and risk implications of supporting and spotlighting girl and young women's activism? There is a risk that girl and young women activists will dilute or refocus their demands away from more contentious issues they work on such as abortion rights, LGBTQI+ issues, and political lobbying, if they associate too closely with a large INGO because of the influence of the INGO itself, its donors and its relationship with government.

It is important for both parties to consider the negative consequences for girls' and young women's groups of a very close relationship with a formalised or INGOs, and identify ways to guard against them. It is critical that girls and young women are supported to consider the risks to their own work and make informed decisions about how they want to proceed.

---

<sup>22</sup>FRIDA and MamaCash (2018) Girls to the Front

This raises **important** questions  
for both INGOs and girls' and  
young women's groups to  
grapple with

## 5.5 Intersectionality and the risks of entrenching other forms of power beyond gender

It is important also to consider some of the wider limitations and unintended consequences of supporting girl and young women activists. Areas for further exploration include:

- The risk that supporting girl and young women's groups could reinforce existing power hierarchies (i.e. if activism is biased towards more privileged groups, could we be further excluding other groups of girls and young people?)
- Looking at girls' and young women's activism from an intersectional lens<sup>23</sup> and identifying other forms of disadvantage. This must mean including boys and young men, finding ways to be inclusive of their voices and allow participation of other diverse groups.



---

<sup>23</sup> - Kanji, N.; Cotula, L.; Hilhorst, T.; Toulmin, C. and Witten, W. (2005) Can Land Registration Serve Poor and Marginalised Groups?. Summary Report, Research Report 1, Securing Land Rights in Africa, London, UK: International Institute for Environment and Development

# 6. FURTHER RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## 6.1 Areas for further research

The findings in this study have implications for the way forward for organisations wanting to work with and support adolescent girl and young women activists in West Africa. Yet this preliminary research also identifies significant knowledge gaps to be addressed to enable more meaningful and targeted interaction with activists and their groups in West Africa. Here we point to some critical areas for further research and mapping.

### *Mapping of activism in West African countries*

The biggest barrier to organisations working constructively and additively in this space is a lack of definitive knowledge on girls' and young women's activism in the West Africa region. There is a need for a comprehensive and detailed mapping to establish how widespread girl and young women's activism and organising is, to identify what this activism looks like at all levels, and concretely what the needs and priorities of these activists are in different locations. This is especially the case at a grassroots level and the further you go from urban centres such as rural, offline, small-scale and informal groups. This opportunity is two-fold because it is:

- an opportunity for Plan International and other organisations and stakeholders to generate the data to understand the range, scale, form and needs of girl and young women's activism
- an opportunity for girl and young women activists: in the research and particularly the HCD workshop, we found that, an ability to connect (digitally or face to face) with others working in a similar space has instant value and allows them to self-organise new initiatives. Inclusion of less visible girls and young women would create more opportunities and provide a platform for excluded and under-represented girls' and young women's groups to be part of this too.

There are practical challenges to discovering girl and young women's grassroots activism. A lot of research could be done to determine that there is little that does exist, and there might be a level of remoteness that even a comprehensive mapping exercise misses. To most effectively approach the mapping, we recommend:

- Doing the mapping as a consortium, with other interested organisations who would benefit from this data
- Identifying diverse and local partners and networks – tapping into the local networks and using multiple approaches to limit biases: working with activist and girl and young women's groups with roots in communities to help identify other activists and aspiring activists

## ***Understanding the specifics of West African activism***

It's important to understand the cultural and socio-economic context and the similarities and differences between communities, countries and sub-regions. This reinforces the point above about approaching mapping carefully to factor in these differences. This points to the need to:

- More closely examine the forces and influences on girl activism and organising in the region and at a country level i.e. what is discernibly West African or eg. Togolese about the activism we're seeing
- Take an open minded approach to how models of activism may differ to other regions which may challenge our assumptions about what types of behaviours and activities constitute 'activism'
- Consider the various drivers and shapers of activism within countries such as culture, social norms, economics, and political and civil society space which shape or affect a girl or young woman's ability to form a group, speak out and how she does it.

## ***Understand more about activist movements and networks and their interaction with groups***

Multiple organisations we spoke with think the most effective way to support girls' and young women's activism is by facilitating connections between youth activists and supporting movements and networks rather than specific groups - this is documented in Plan International's *Powering the movement: Youth-Led Collective Action Strategy (2018-2023)*.

For Plan International West and Central Africa and others to explore the potential of this in the region, it is important to understand in more detail:

- How girl and young women activists and groups define networks and movements
- What informal networks and movements exist, how they operate, and how approaches differ
- Key entry points in the networks and movements, and where an organisation already has a relationship it can leverage to support girl activists and explore where it can develop new relationships for this.

## 6.2 Recommendations from Key Findings

Beyond further research, there are other recommendations and implications for partnering with girl and young women's groups that emerge from the study research findings.

1. Create spaces for girls' and young women's activism and girl and young women's groups to operate in multiple forms, and that include diverse groups

- Foster girls' and young women's activism and organising, acknowledging that it will be organised and structured in different ways. This means recognising that girl activism and organising is a spectrum, and that there are different ways in which girls and young women want to and do participate, lead and make decisions.
- Make space for the participation of diverse groups including less visible and offline groups. Without efforts to find the less visible groups, INGOs end up reinforcing privilege, and without taking a strong diversity and inclusion lens will fail to support the issues that marginalised groups would champion.
- Support dialogue between adult and younger activists and explore the ways in which young people can work with and benefit from the experience of adult and older activists and groups. This includes involving boys and men as partners, members and allies (which many girl and young women-led groups are doing in any case).

2. Acknowledge the role of INGOs and adult organisations in fostering girls' and young women's activism, and lean into this, while enabling activists and groups to retain their autonomy.

- Acknowledge that adult led activism, INGOs and the broader development space are a key trigger and influence for girls' activism and organising in West African countries.
- Consider the ways Plan International and others can continue to support girls and young women to go on their own activism journey, while being aware of power dynamics and avoiding being top-down.
- Support girl and young women activists and their groups to choose which issues they want to work on, supporting them to do so and not imposing a donor's agenda or an INGO's own structures and priorities.
- Help girl and young women activists and their groups access funding, resources and training, but work with them in a way that supports them to retain their independence and guards their own activism space.

3. Carefully consider the different needs of girls and young women's groups, including that they may not want to operate as formal organisations but face barriers that hinder their work

- Loosen red tape around funding applications, financial reporting and other aspects of grant management so as not to put a burden on girl and young women-led groups, and allow them to concentrate on the work they want to do.
- Consider the needs of girl and young women's groups and help girl and young women activists understand the importance of self-care: support them to stay safe and keep their peers safe.
- Critically, this also means organisations carefully approach and design partnerships with girl and young women groups that they work with so that timing, ways of working and workload are realistic for the girl activists. This may mean choosing not to formally 'partner' but directing resources or mentoring girl and young women-led groups.



---

# APPENDIX

# Research Sample

## Expert and stakeholder interviews and consultations

### **Plan International insertional consultations x 8**

- Global level x 2
- Regional level x 2
- Country level x 4 : Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Togo

### **External expert consultation x 7**

- 1 x Regional Head of Youth Engagement at INGO and former activist
- 1 x Founder of Regional organisation focused on girl activists
- 1 x Consultant at Fund focused on adolescent girls, West African region
- 2 x in-country organisations focused on youth activism
- 2 x in-country adult activists

## Girl and young women activists

### **Who were they?**

We recruited girl and young women activists and members of girl and young women-led groups across five West African countries (Nigeria, Liberia, Togo, Guinea and Senegal)

- All adolescent girls / young women
- Aged 16 - 22 years old<sup>24</sup>
- Current activists / advocates: working on specific issues affecting girls or towards girls' rights / equality / power dynamics (a mix of issues and approaches across the group)
- Organisation / activism to be running for at least one year
- Organisation / activism to involve others in community
- Little to no association with international NGOs including Plan International
- Purposefully recruited activists who were confident, articulate, English or French speakers and who would be comfortable in an international workshop in order to maximize their participation, added value for them, and our learning
- Within this small group of activists, the recruitment process prioritised girls from a variety of socio-ethnic groups, including from urban, rural and peri-urban locations, and ethnic groups, to ensure inclusion of minority groups where possible

---

<sup>24</sup>Working with an older age group was due to practical realities of our workshop recruitment process and taking proactive safeguarding mitigation steps, for example, deciding not to take school aged girls out-of-school for an extended period meant we selected more young women who had graduated from secondary school.

### **How did we find them?**

- They were recruited through: Plan International's in country networks and Copa Research's local partner on the ground search
- The aim was to find girls 'under the radar of international NGOs', ultimately we found girls on the fringes of Plan International's networks
- Final sample skew towards 18+, urban, well education and confident with technology (with some exceptions)<sup>25</sup>

### **How representative are they?**

- A small workshop with 10 girls and young women, 2 from each of the 5 countries i.e. illustrative but not representative of an activist audience
- We did not speak to all girls and young women, were reliant on past experience and activists' experiences of working with a wider sample of girls and young women.

---

<sup>25</sup>This reflects what our landscape review has told us about the profile of activists: educated, urban, older, and some biases in the approach (the requirement for an online recruitment application process, the need to fly them out of the country for the workshop).

# Interviews

The following adults were interviewed to inform this study. Others chose to remain anonymous. The names of the 10 girls and young women activists who participated in the design workshop are withheld to protect their identities.

Chernor Bah, Purposeful Productions, Sierra Leone

Ornella Ouhokoh, Gender & Policy Advocate, Women Deliver Alumni (Class of 2018), Togo

Yah Vallah Parwon, Feminist and Co-Founder of Rising Youth Mentorship Initiative, Liberia

# Bibliography

Chant, Sylvia (2016) Women, girls, and world poverty: empowerment, equality or essentialism? *International Development Planning Review*, 38 (1). pp. 1-24. ISSN 1474-6743

FRIDA and AWID (2016) *Brave, Creative, Resilient. The global state of young feminist organizing.* <https://www.awid.org/publications/brave-creative-and-resilient-state-young-feminist-organizing>

FRIDA and MamaCash (2018) *Girls to the Front: A snapshot of girl-led organising.* [https://youngfeministfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GirlsToTheFront\\_Report\\_web.pdf](https://youngfeministfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GirlsToTheFront_Report_web.pdf)

FRIDA and MamaCash (2018) *Girls to the Front: Case Studies.* <https://www.mamacash.org/en/girls-to-the-front-case-studies>

The Guardian (2015) *The girls aiming to change Africa: young activists speak out.* <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/sep/01/girls-rights-activists-change-africa-disability-gender-equality-fgm>

International Telecommunication Union, 2017 data <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

Kanji, N.; Cotula, L.; Hilhorst, T.; Toulmin, C. and Witten, W. (2005) *Can Land Registration Serve Poor and Marginalised Groups?. Summary Report, Research Report 1, Securing Land Rights in Africa, London, UK: International Institute for Environment and Development*

Medie, Peace. (2016). *Women's and Feminist Activism in West Africa.* 10.1002/9781118663219.wbegs182.

Plan International (2018) *Champions of Change Gender Transformative Advocacy Model:* <https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/2019/08/champions-change-girls-rights-and-gender-equality>

Plan International (2018) *Global Youth Associations Map Insights (GYAMI)*

Plan International (2018) *Powering the Movement: Youth-Led Collective Action Strategy 2018-2023*

Plan International (2017) Planting Equality 2.0, Getting it Right for Girls and Boys

Plan International (2018) Getting it Right: a guidance note for gender transformative programming and influencing

Slegh, H.; Barker, G.; Kimonyo, A.; Ndolimana, P. and Bannerman, M. (2013) “I can do Women’s Work”: Reflections on Engaging Men as Allies in Women’s Economic Empowerment in Rwanda’, Gender and Development 21.1: 15–30. Cited by Edström and Shahrokh p. 33

With and for Girls (2018) Girls, The Agents of Change: Lessons from a collaborative approach to funding with and for girls: <https://www.withandforgirls.org/reportsandresources>

UNICEF: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/adolescents/overview/>

United Nations (2016) Youth Civic Engagement Report <https://www.un.org/development/desa/capacity-development/tools/tool/world-youth-report-on-youth-civic-engagement/>

## About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We strive for a just world for children and young people, working with them and our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of discrimination against girls, exclusion and vulnerability.

We support children's rights from when they are born to when they reach adulthood. Using our reach, experience and knowledge, we drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels and enable children and young people to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We have been building powerful partnerships for children for over 80 years, and are active in more than 75 countries. We are independent of governments, religions and political parties.

### Plan International

Global Hub Dukes Court,  
Duke Street, Woking, Surrey GU21 5BH,  
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1483 755155 Fax: +44 (0) 1483 756505  
E-mail: [info@plan-international.org](mailto:info@plan-international.org) [plan-international.org](http://plan-international.org)

Published in 2020. Text © Plan International.

[facebook.com/planinternational](https://facebook.com/planinternational)  
[twitter.com/planglobal](https://twitter.com/planglobal)  
[instagram.com/planinternational](https://instagram.com/planinternational)  
[linkedin.com/company/plan-international](https://linkedin.com/company/plan-international)  
[youtube.com/user/planinternationaltv](https://youtube.com/user/planinternationaltv)