

Girls and young women advocacy. ©Plan International

HER VOICE MATTERS:

The power of girls advocacy and strengthening civil society

Success stories - Plan International

Worldwide, there are 1.2 billion young people (aged 15 to 24). They account for sixteen percent of the global population. At the same time, less than two percent of the world's parliamentarians are younger than 30 and fewer than six percent are under 35. Girls and young women (GYW) are being shut out from civic spaces, making it harder for them to express opinions and associate with allies to advance their activism. Despite these hurdles, we are witnessing a rise in girl-led and youth-led activism that challenges gender inequality, exclusion, and injustice. Every day, courageous girls and young women come together to claim their right to be meaningfully included. Plan International supports girls and young women in taking the space to speak up and amplify their voices. We provide them with the tools they need to thrive and make change happen. It is our conviction that strengthening girls, young women, and civil society at large in their advocacy for rights, representation, and resources, is essential for systemic change and long-lasting impact.

Therefore, Plan International recommends a continuation and prioritization by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of investing in strengthening civil society and lobby and advocacy. Our key learnings and recommendations:

- Youth-led lobby and advocacy:
 - leads to improved access to services and facilities at community level;
 - amplifies the lived realities and barriers GYW are facing and can lead to budget allocation on a community and a national level;

- leads to the reform of laws and policies that negatively impact the lives and development of girls and young women;
- is an effective instrument to influence state members at international level. International agreements facilitate the lobby and advocacy, and accountability of member states to adopt/implement those agreements at national level.
- Civil society, and in particular GYW advocacy, strengthens female leadership and equal access/representation in decision-making on a local and national level.
- Regional civil society advocacy can improve prospects, health and rights of millions of girls and young women, for example, through the adoption of model laws to change the practice of child marriage.
- Youth/GYW in all their diversity are to be included in decision-making to leave no one behind.
- Linking international, regional, and national lobby efforts can lead to the adoption of similar laws on all levels.
- Effective lobby and advocacy is a long-term process and requires long-term funding and support.

Eighth case stories illustrate our recommendation to continue investing in civil society strengthening and girls and young women lobby and advocacy:



Loveness from Malawi stands up for equal rights for girls and young women. ©Plan International

Community impact:

1. Improved access to sexual and reproductive health facilities and services for youths

For the first example we travel to Malawi, to one of the projects in the Break Free! programme.¹ In this project, youth hub members were trained on the use of health facility scorecard tool YouthWyze, and on processes to monitor the delivery of quality Sexual Reproductive Health (SRHR) services. The findings from the scorecards were presented and discussed with young people and duty bearers. A Member of Parliament from the Break Free! implementation area in Machinga also participated in these training sessions. He thereafter committed to constructing a designated youth-friendly SRHR-department at Nainunje Health Centre. This subsequently led to a two hundred percent increase in youth attending the health facilities with a referral from the YouthWyze tool.²

The next destination is Zambia, where under the same initiative of Break Free!, youth hub members were supported and trained in advocating for their needs. This led to increased access to youth-friendly SRHR-services at the local health centre. They lobbied with the management committee of the health centre to increase the number of days on which these services are available, and adjust the closing hours in order to make the health centre accessible to school-going adolescents. This resulted in the youth-friendly SRH-department being open on at least three days a week, rather than just one, and the opening hours going up to at least five hours a day from the initial two hours.

2. Strong advocacy regarding the accessibility of and funding for sex education

“Sex and relationships are not talked about, so young people don’t learn how to protect themselves”, says youth activist Peace (24) from Malawi. “As a result, many girls in Malawi and in other African countries become pregnant. Their parents often see no other option than having their daughter marry the child’s father. After that, continuing their education is usually out of the question.” Therefore, we need to support youth advocates like Peace who take a leading role in the community to stress the importance of proper sex education for girls. Peace continues to address this taboo. For instance by talking to and working with religious (community) leaders. Peace: “If they recognise a need for change and speak up about it, chances are high the rest of the community will follow.” The challenges Peace faces as a youth advocate are enormous, but step by step we are working towards a better future. Peace says: “This year (2022, red.) we were able to get more budget for our mission from the Ministry of Gender. It is a small step, but one that is going to lead to many more big changes. This really shows that the ministry wants to engage with young people and listen to their concerns and plans. With this, we can really make a change.”

1 Break Free! is a Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) funded strategic partnership with Plan International (lead), SRHR Africa Trust and FAWE and aims to strengthen youth Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and promote gender equality.

2 YouthWyze is multi-channel intervention implemented under the Break Free! programme by SRHR African Trust (SAT). YouthWyze aims to disseminate information and education around SRHR and establish linkages to SRHR services for young people.

https://www.kit.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/YouthWyzeReport_LQ.pdf

National impact:

3. Signing of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act

In January 2023, President Julius Maada Bio from Sierra Leone signed into law the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act. This act prescribes that a minimum of thirty percent of all elective and appointive positions in public and private sectors, are to be reserved for women. Earlier, in October 2022, 140 girls and boys took over parliament for one day to debate the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act. The Act, however, was not just a result of girls taking over parliament. Plan International in Sierra Leone, as part of the previous Girls Advocacy Alliance³ and the current She Leads programme⁴, contributed to the legislative process. Together with other organisations focusing on girls and young women, Plan International formed the working group that developed the first draft of the Act. Moreover, they organised radio talk shows focusing on the underlying social norms and traditions that restrict girls and young women in taking part in politics and decision-making. Finally, after experiencing many hurdles and resistance from different parts of Sierra Leonean society, the state recognised the full and equal inclusion of women into politics and economy in 2023.

The Act is a monumental legal advancement for gender equality in Sierra Leone, a country ranked 162 out of 191 countries in the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index. But it is much more than that. It is also a source of hope and inspiration for girls like Blessing (16), who recently attended the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York with She Leads. At CSW, Blessing took part in a panel discussion, expressing that we will see her in parliament in the near future to work for a better future for girls and young women in her country.⁵

4. Inclusion of youth in the writing of guidelines and structures for survivors of gender-based violence

Youth in the Machinga district in Malawi say that their exclusion from support unit guidelines surrounding gender based violence (GBV) by the government, makes them subject to various forms of abuse in their communities. Paituma (20), who advocates for the inclusion of youths, says that despite the availability of community GBV survivor support units, youth is still not supported. She said: "This discourages us from reporting further abuse, thus perpetuating our suffering."

Paituma is an active member of a youth hub supported by the Break Free! programme. In 2021, Break Free! provided Paituma and other youth hub members with training in lobby and advocacy. Thereafter, the youth laid out their demand to be included in decision-making during a meeting with the Ministry of Gender, Community Development, and Social Welfare, Plan International in Malawi, SRHR Africa Trust, and the Forum for African women Educationalists (FAWE) at the district's council hall. The ministry acknowledged the gap and committed to reviewing the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Upon request from the Ministry of Gender, Break Free! in collaboration with the Power to Youth Alliance supported the review process in 2022. In 2022, the SOP was revised, and youth participation was incorporated in the guidelines and community structures.

This example shows how effective it is to include youth in decision-making and policy development around SRHR.

3 Girls Advocacy Alliance (2016-2020) was a MFA funded strategic partnership with Plan International (lead), Terre des Homme, and Defence for Children-ECPAT.

4 She Leads is a MFA funded strategic partnership with Plan International (lead), Defence for Children-ECPAT, FEMNET, and Terre des Hommes.

5 She Leads focuses on the participation of girls and young women in lobby and advocacy. The programme is implemented in nine countries in Africa and the Middle East.



Mellicentia from Sierra Leone, speaks at the UN Children's Rights Committee. ©Girls Advocacy Alliance/May Tachapanich

5. Lifting of the ban of pregnant girls attending school

Between 2016 and 2019, the Girls Advocacy Alliance (GAA) in Sierra Leone, in collaboration with human rights Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), successfully advocated for pregnant girls' and teenage mothers' access to school.⁶ They organised planning meetings, press conferences, data collection from affected girls, engaged the media on the case and brought the case to the ECOWAS court. In December 2019, the ECOWAS court ordered the Sierra Leonean government to lift the ban on pregnant girls attending school. In March 2020, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) announced that the ban was overturned with immediate effect. In March 2022 a new policy was adopted promoting inclusion and comprehensive safety for all children. This was the result of a long trajectory of collaborative action by CSOs to secure an ECOWAS Court of Justice ruling against the challenged policy. The case illustrates that change can take years.

6. Improved SRHR services and referrals for youth

Another case to highlight that change requires a long-term investment: Through various engagement meetings, the Yes I Do (YID) programme⁷ in Zambia stimulated more collaboration between the Ministry of General Education and the Ministry of Health, in working on addressing child marriage and teenage pregnancy. With the YID-programme, in collaboration with government and traditional leaders, Plan International and partners engaged in policy-influencing through the district council and national level. Through our influencing work the collaboration between the Ministry of General Education and the Ministry of Health was strengthened, which resulted in the allocation of additional budget to strengthen SRHR- services in health facilities and referral systems on SRHR for school-going boys and girls. Furthermore, our lobbying efforts led to revisions on the "supply chain policy", and "youth-friendly policy" on SRHR-services and commodities to address the weak implementation, including a revision by the Ministry of Health removing intermediaries from the supply chain.

With the She Leads and Break Free! projects, Plan International and its partners continue to influence key government stakeholders on various levels, building on the results of the GAA and YID-programmes. Together with civil society organisations and youth groups, Plan International continues to strengthen and safeguard female leadership, meaningful youth participation, and gender equality.

6 Youth advocate Mellicentia | Girls Advocacy Alliance (for more clips, stories and mini documentaries see the same website www.girlsadvocacyalliance.org)

7 The Yes I Do programme (2016-2020) was a MFA funded strategic partnership with Plan International (lead), Amref Flying Doctors, Choice for Youth and Sexuality, KIT Royal Tropical Institute, and Rutgers.



Youth advocate Joyce moderating the She Leads intergenerational dialogue in Accra, Ghana. ©Plan International

Regional impact:

7. Adoption of model law on child marriage in Southern Africa

In 2015, Plan International initiated, in partnership with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum, initiated the development of a regional model law on child marriage. In 2016 the model law was adopted. Plan International and its partners supported national parliaments in Southern Africa to organise follow-up meetings. What followed was the adoption of child marriage laws in Malawi and Mozambique, and legislative amendments against child marriage in other countries in the region.

Global impact:

8. UN Human Rights Council adopts a policy on Girls and Young Women (GYW) activism

In June 2022, the UN Human Rights Council adopted its first-ever policy on GYW activism. This policy highlights the barriers GYW activists face in their work and provides recommendations to decision-makers on how to best address these obstacles. The delegation of She Leads made a significant contribution to this process through long-term lobby and advocacy activities. This included participating actively in the negotiations, providing presentations, text suggestions, organising side events at conferences, and facilitating the participation of two young women in a closed-door meeting with diplomats.

The policy on GYW activism includes several recommendations to Member States: to support movement-building

amongst girls and young women; eliminate discriminatory age-based legal barriers for girls and young women to exercise their civil and political rights; and create and enhance platforms and processes for girls and young women to participate in formal decision-making processes. These recommendations provide detailed guidance for Member States (and other stakeholders) on how to implement their obligations under international human rights law to ensure that girls and young women enjoy their civil and political rights. This policy is a critical instrument for GYW of She Leads to hold their member states and key decision-makers accountable at an international, national, and local level.

9. Conclusion

These cases illustrate how strengthening civil society and supporting (girls and young women-led) lobby and advocacy lead to concrete change with long-lasting impact. However, changes in laws and policies through advocacy do not happen overnight. They are the result of long-term and complex processes involving multiple stakeholders at a local, national, regional, and international level. Therefore, partnerships for long-term support and flexible financing of civil society and lobby & advocacy are critical to achieve sustainable outcomes. **Their voice matters!**

Contact details:

Geertje Hollenberg, Program Director Plan International
geertje.hollenberg@planinternational.nl
www.planinternational.nl