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Guidance Note on Working with Girl Researchers



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Girl Research and Learning Power (GRL Power)

"The research became ours", GRL Power researcher from Madaba.

Adolescent girls can provide unique insights on issues that impact their lives. They can identify and articulate the challenges they face and the resources they need to live safe, dignified and empowered lives. They are uniquely positioned to retrieve information from their



Girl Researchers conducting an interview

peers that adult researchers would not be able to obtain, which ultimately provides unique insights on their lived reality. This information can help the international development community, governments, schools and other stakeholders and influencers design and implement more practical and effective programs. In addition, girl-led research shifts the paradigm on the role of girls in programming from participants to active leaders whose decisions and actions matter. Unlike traditional empowerment programs, girl-led research emboldens girls by providing them with the opportunity to practice leadership within their community. The results of their research add more nuance to the knowledge-base on adolescent girls and demonstrate that young people can create knowledge and actively contribute to adult conversation on topics that impact their lives.

Although the international development community recognizes that engaging young people is key to the social change process, most

strategies for youth engagement invite young people to participate, but not completely lead, the process. Further, most strategies focus on engaging young adults over the age of 18 and very few strategies exist for engaging adolescents. As such, there are limited opportunities specifically for adolescent girls to lead the research and program development process.

The Girl Research and Learning Power project (GRL Power) sought to provide adolescent girls with the tools, resources and support to conduct qualitative research on their safety in public spaces. GRL Power is one of the first adolescent girl-led research initiatives in Jordan and is funded under a USAID YouthPower Learning contract managed by Making Cents International. The project is implemented by Mercy Corps' Regional Center for the Advancement of Adolescent Girls (Girl Center) in partnership with ActionAid Arab Regional Initiative.

Prior to GRL Power girl consultations conducted in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Tunisia by Mercy Corps' Girl Center and partner ActionAid reinforced that adolescent girls' mobility is challenged by incessant street harassment¹. Acknowledging that adolescent girls are the true experts in their experiences and lived reality, GRL Power empowered 18 adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 19 in Amman, Madaba and Balqa, Jordan to conduct research on their experience in public spaces. These girl researchers participated in qualitative research and leadership trainings that were conducted by research mentors. These mentors were young women from their communities who were trained in overseeing girl-led research. After this training, the adolescent girls conducted a total of 75 interviews

¹ Mercy Corps Girl Center: Breaking Silence Report. April, 2017.

with their peers to better understand challenges to girls' safety in their communities.

The result of this girl-led research is available in a case study and two webinars so that those working on making public spaces safe, including UN agencies, international and national organizations, governments, community-based organizations and schools, may benefit from the insights and knowledge that their research generated. This guidance note highlights learnings from GRL Power to promote girl-led research in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region.

Challenges to girl-led research in MENA

*"The society thinks there is no point that you improve yourself"-
Adolescent girl, Jordan.²*

Girl Effect, a nonprofit that works with girls, piloted girl-led research in Rwanda in 2012. Many international organizations, including UNICEF and Save the Children, have been engaging young adults over the age of 19 in research in the Middle East. However, together with partner ActionAid, Mercy Corps is one of the first agencies to undertake adolescent girl-led research in MENA. Girl-led research in this region presents unique challenges, such as extra time needed to build up the confidence and the skills of the mentors and the researchers to undertake the new role and gain community acceptance. Although youth participation projects are widely accepted, girl researchers are not program participants, but are active leaders in a community-based project. This type of visible leadership can challenge social norms and expectations and

² Mercy Corps Girl Center: Before She Left School Report. July, 2017.

challenge the success of the project. Further, many girls have never experienced this type of empowerment project where their ideas and decisions steer the project. They need time to both learn research skills and how to exercise authority in a project. On a different level, the local community's acceptance of having adolescent girls leading research is not always easily obtained. Mona, a girl researcher from Balqa, describes this challenge in a positive light, *"What's nice about the project is that it challenges the norms of what girls do and the stigma of "'aib" or shame."*

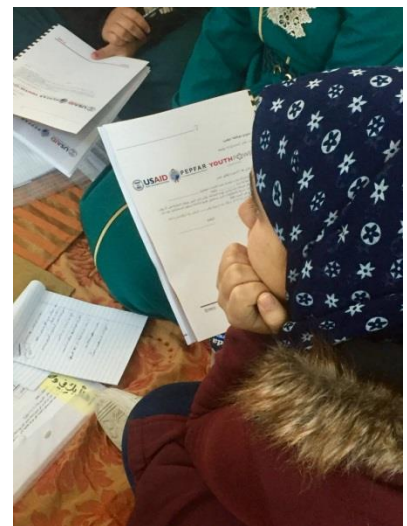
Steps to ensure success

"This research was one of the best experiences in my life, and I learned so much and changed my mind about a lot of topics" - GRL Power research from Madaba.

Regardless of the barriers that face girl-led research in MENA, GRL Power managed to address these challenges and learn good practices for ensuring success in future similar efforts:

- **Collaborate with local female research mentors:**

In order to ground girl-led research in the community, girl researchers should be mentored by young, local women. These women can both guide the girls in their research and serve as role models of women actively engaged in their communities. The presence of local young women from the community also aids in community acceptance of girl-led research. The mentors do not have to be experts in research, as the mentor training would help



Girl Researchers' Training

them in learning what they need to mentor the girl researchers. However, choose mentors who do not mind making mistakes, and who are willing to learn from the girls before anyone else.

- **Allocate sufficient time for training research mentors and girl researchers:**

Girl-led research is a new concept for the international community as well as for the local community. It is likely that research mentors have never been asked to guide- much less completely lead and manage- a project with adolescents. It is also likely that adolescent girls have never had the opportunity to make leadership decisions that steer a project. Both mentors and girls will need time to absorb knowledge and information and settle into these new roles. Make time in your project to hold extra meetings with the mentors and the researchers. Make sure trust is built and a safe space is created for learning and making mistakes. And remember not to rush things. Every girl researcher has her own pace, follow it and allow it.

- **Provide stipends for research mentors and girls:**

Population Council evidence affirms the need to compensate girls and young women for their work³. This incentivizes their work and, living in a society where financial compensation plays a role in designating esteem, it helps women and girls recognize the value of their contributions. Providing compensation also helps women and girls move away from the gendered expectation of unpaid labor, ultimately contributing to building a cultural framework that recognizes the need to compensate women and girls for their work.

³ Ghati, D. and Austrian, K. (2010). Girl-Centered Program Design: A Toolkit to Develop, Strengthen and Expand Adolescent Girls Programs. Population Council.

- **Trust the direction of the girls:**

Girl-led research entails a level of risk in that adolescents are steering the direction of the program. Precedent and instinct may make those guiding want to interfere with the decisions of the girls; however, a girl-led project must be just that: girl led. Aside from decisions that impact the safety and security of the girls and their families, the girls should be given as much freedom as possible to steer the direction of the research and overall program. Put your ego aside, and remember that the girls are the leaders of the research.

- **Just be there!**

Be present. Make sure the resources are available for the girl researches, and provide support when they ask for it. Most importantly, do not underestimate adolescent girls' ability to lead when provided the space.

In a nutshell

Girl-led research empowers girls as leaders in their communities in an authentic, action-based manner. Unlike traditional empowerment programs, in girl-led research girls are actively taking part in a community-based program that has implications on future programming that impacts them and their peers. This gives the program a different meaning and enables girls to see themselves as leaders whose decisions and actions matter. While communities will learn new lessons when taking this nontraditional approach to research, all will learn that by putting



Girl Researchers in an activity to brainstorm the research question

girls' voices upfront one will see a different angle that you cannot visit on your own.

Additional Resources:

Girl Effect, (2016). *Trainers' Handbook: Tips and topics for equipping a GRU with qualitative research skills*

Biber, S. Leavy, P. (2007) *Feminist Research Practice*. USA: Sage Publications.

Chilisa, B. (2011) *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. USA: Sage Publications.

Davis, D. (2002) *Curriculum; Training Young Women to be Researchers*. Ms. Foundation for Women Collaborative Fund for Healthy Girls/ Healthy Women

[GRL Power webinars](#)