



CARE® TIPPING POINT

Girls' Leadership: How to forgo power to empower

After nine years of programming, learning, and evaluation, solely cultivating leadership skills in adolescent girls is no longer the bar in youth-focused programming. The importance of meaningful leadership through opportunities and spaces is needed to embrace the skills girls are learning and accelerate the social change possible. By convening adolescent girl activists, technical advisors from diverse fields, government officials, and leading movement actors in girls' rights, Tipping Point presents here not just what the last decade has taught us but importantly, how to move forward and achieve where the girls' rights field should be evolving. This brief discusses the need for focus on what girls want and what matter to them, how they wish to connect with others to achieve their vision, and where they would like to take action.

If you are interested in seeing how this reflection fits into the larger story, see our Tipping Point Global Learning Overview found [here](#).

What we have seen, experienced, learned, and evaluated

Engaging allies, including boys and men, is imperative to changing norms limiting girls' leadership: At the base of the disproportionate experience girls suffer worldwide is the marginalization that stems from rooted gender-biased attitudes and practices. Nonetheless, girls remain one of the most susceptible to the impacts of climate change, war, economic recessions, and more – yet girls also remain a driving force of generational societal change. ***“While for boys, adolescence means greater possibilities and a broadening world, for girls it means greater limitations”*** thus, necessitating involvement of social norms and behavioral change.

During our Tipping Point Global Learning Event, we heard about working with men and boys, specifically prior to implementing any program or initiative. Discussing and sharing the goals, as well as the purpose of activities with male family members or male leaders of the community is tantamount for the support

which can propel adolescent girls to take true initiative and leadership. To do so, it is imperative that any program/initiative includes a mapping component to find the network available for girls to connect with initially. Unlocking the enablers allows friendly spaces to become more available for girls to convene and share with each other, to consolidate the effectiveness of working together on issues affecting them and garnering the skills to activate their leadership abilities. As one girl in Dhaka stated, “this is not taking out power from anyone, rather sharing power”.

To mitigate the possibility of backlash and risks to girls that comes with challenging the social norms that hinder their leadership, CARE's experience with a social learning curriculum in India with children between 10-14 years old shows that combining activities with real-life activities provides a way to hold critical reflections on social issues, for instance using a social studies lesson to discuss gender equality.

1 The Power to Lead: A Leadership Model for Adolescent Girls. CARE.

Without access to meaningful spaces, leadership skills are not empowering in and of themselves:

“Youth leaders are not youth who are being prepared to play a role at some point in the future but rather are working to have an impact now²”.

Opportunities to engage youth groups has typically served them as passive participants but creating the space for meaningful engagement through formal settings such as within schools is possible and has been achieved by CARE leadership development programs for girls in Bolivia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, and Tanzania³.

Given the restraints on the mobility and freedom of girls, schools and other formal settings present an excellent alternative to the typical program development spaces for promoting girls’ leadership. Inclusion in spaces where girls can put to practice their inherent and learned leadership skills without fear or shame is what truly empowers them. As noted by CARE’s model for gender equality framework, empowerment and leadership are distinct yet have linkages that rely on the same facets necessary for social change: agency, structures, and relationships.

Women’s groups need to model the leadership characteristics they hope to foster in young girls by trusting them to govern themselves: For girls to truly see themselves in leadership roles and embody the potential of change that exists within them, supportive allyship and championship by women’s groups is critical. The messaging is often focused on giving girls a voice, however, time and again, the existence of the voice of adolescent girls is proven. What girls truly need is the ability to express their voices and the freedom to do the necessary work for making changes. To do so, adults need to empower by stepping back, and by sharing their own power.

“If we truly want to build girls’ leadership beyond rhetoric...we need to hand over the mic to them and let them decide how they want to lead⁴”.

During the learning event, one girl noted that no one wants to lose their power, so they are often insulted when girls

2 Schoenberg and Salmond and The Points of Light Youth Leadership Institute.

3 The Power to Lead: A Leadership Model for Adolescent Girls. CARE.

4 Jayanthi Pushkaran, Senior Program Officer, Adolescent Girls at EMpower

GIRLS LEADING THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

In **Ecuador**, girls founded a girl-led network, the National Network for the Defense of Children’s and Adolescents’ Rights, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic to discuss ideas, share concerns and advocate for solutions.

In **Niger**, girls were selected to work with community management committees to develop localized messages centered on COVID risks and how community members could protect themselves.

Find out more [here](#).

express themselves and demand rights, so it is imperative that those who hold power remember that the ability for girls to express themselves and demand rights is not a threat to their own livelihoods.

Where we go from here to expand girls’ leadership

The primary focus of girls’ leadership needs to consider what holistic and inclusive youth leadership is. To do this, convergent programming needs to be employed,

“for adolescents, with adolescents but most programs at this point are for adolescents with adults creating the programs whereas it should be that they are part of the program from the beginning. They need to be included from the very beginning, it is their lives and their programs so they should be creating not us⁵”.

CARE, our partners and allies in the fight for girls’ rights focus on these principles when calling for action in policy, practice and funding:

Gender at the Center

- Girls’ collectives are key to building both skills and generating opportunities for girls to express their leadership.
- Beyond building agency, meaningful engagement with girls in deciding their issues is important.

5 UNICEF on girl-centered policies, government partner panel discussion.

- Through gender-role shifting games, community dialogues enable safer spaces to discuss issues related to unequal distribution of labor that falls on women and girls and limits their leadership opportunities. These can be girl-led spaces, allowing younger girls in the community to be involved to learn and lead.
- Girls demonstrating leadership may cause backlash. Programs must take initiative to mitigate and address backlash to girls' leadership in the community, planning alongside girls and their allies.

Holistic and Inclusive

- Focus on skills development such as language skills and project writing skills which can enhance the inclusion of adolescent youth in international spaces and projects so they can be included in each step.
- Use the girls' own networks within country, and internationally, to increase reach on issues which permeate throughout geographical contexts and to reach marginalized girls.
- Include girls who are out of school in leadership spaces – they have unique needs, priorities and voice.
- Create financial opportunities and support for girls so they can access available trainings and resources.

Movement-founded

- Create spaces for girls to strategize on sustainability of their movements.
- Map movement actors who can be champions for girl-led implementation areas and sectoral focuses.
- Exposure visits to different countries to increase connection with other youth-led groups which will enshrine advocacy and programmatic needs within a global movement.

The meaning of youth-led must evolve

- Support girls' visible leadership by coordinating access to multi-lateral spaces (registration, proposal, visas) and reduce logistical barriers.
- Shared leadership should be guaranteed in decision-making spaces to ensure meaningful youth participation.

Want more information or to connect with adolescent programming champions from around CARE?

Email tippingpoint@care.org

