



Jacqueline (third from right) meets with fellow members of the Bantè Girls Advisory Committee.

PLAN FOR GIRLS CASE STUDY: BENIN

The Power of Safe Spaces

A project designed to amplify girls' voices is creating spaces where they can learn, grow and lead with confidence.

Jacqueline, a 25-year-old youth advocate from Bantè, Benin, knows exactly where to meet the other girl leaders from her village – no directions needed. Everyone heads to the small blue-and-white building in the public square. Inside, the simple room is furnished with wooden benches and chairs. The girls greet one another and settle in, knowing they won't be interrupted. This space belongs to them.

For Jacqueline and her peers, this is a relatively new experience.

“What is a safe space? It’s a place where we can truly be ourselves. If we want to say something private, we go inside and talk. No one disturbs us.”

—JACQUELINE, 25

In 2018, Plan International partnered with communities in the Collines department of central Benin to launch the Plan for Girls (P4G) project – a girl-led initiative designed to strengthen girls' capacity to claim their rights. A key step in this process was creating supportive environments where girls could connect, build leadership skills, and discuss the issues that matter most to them. Through the project, 57 villages across four communes¹ established safe spaces for girls.

Jacqueline is one of 19 elected members of P4G's Girls Advisory Committee² for the commune of Bantè. Representing villages from across the commune, committee members bring forward their peers' ideas, concerns and solutions, ensuring that girls' voices guide the project. Jacqueline was among those who championed the creation of safe spaces from the start.



TOP: Safe spaces are equipped with resources on girls' rights, health, leadership and community issues.

BOTTOM: The meeting hall at the safe space in Dassa-Zoumé.

Building a supportive environment

At its inception, P4G carried out in-depth consultations with over 860 girls in Benin to understand their needs and priorities. One message stood out clearly: Girls wanted safe, welcoming environments where they could speak freely and organize collective action for gender equality. Without such spaces, their only option was to meet in the open, gathering under trees for shade, with little privacy.

In response, the project worked closely with young people and local leaders to identify secure, accessible locations in each village. Many of the chosen sites were community buildings, municipal halls or health-facility annexes.

In Jacqueline's community, the girls' safe space was established in the public meeting house, a two-room building used for village gatherings. With support from the project, one room was renovated for the girls – it was cemented, painted and furnished with 10 benches and 30 chairs. The other room remained open to the public.

According to Jacqueline, having a dedicated space has made it easier for girls to carry out their activities, from awareness campaigns to income-generating projects.

"The community is happy too," she adds. "Before, when we invited them to events, it was under the mango trees, and some people had to stand. Now they can sit comfortably in the hall."

Inside these safe spaces, girls not only connect with their peers but are also welcomed by trained adult mentors, whose presence is key to fostering a supportive climate. Each space is staffed by two volunteer mentors – one woman and one man – chosen by the youth as trusted figures and vetted by community leaders.

- 1 The P4G project was implemented in four communes – Bantè, Glazoué, Dassa-Zoumé, and Savalou – located in the Collines Department of central Benin.
- 2 P4G established a Girls Advisory Committee in each of the four communes involved in the project. Every village elected one or two girls to represent their peers on the committee and help guide project activities. Committee members participated in advocacy training and worked together to plan actions in their respective communities, including sensitization campaigns and educational talks.

Through individual and group sessions, mentors provide guidance on topics such as sexual and reproductive health, informed decision making and access to education or vocational training. They also support youth in developing income-generation skills, from sewing and embroidery to making soap. But their role extends beyond the building. Mentors work closely with child-protection services, health care providers and local authorities to respond to cases of sexual and gender-based violence. They also collaborate with youth leaders to facilitate intergenerational dialogues, creating room for parents and children to discuss traditionally taboo topics.

“We’ve noticed that parent-child dialogue has improved a lot,” says Jacqueline, reflecting on the broader community impact. “We’ve also raised awareness of early pregnancies, and we’ve seen a slight reduction.”

Connecting girls to vital services and opportunities

On September 28, 2023, the commune of Bantè celebrated the opening of a newly constructed safe space at the municipal level. Unlike the smaller, village-based spaces, this centre brings together girls from across the commune to plan activities, strengthen solidarity and access centralized services. Located within the government’s Guichet Unique de Protection Sociale (GUPS) – a “one-stop shop” consolidating health, protection and livelihood services under one roof – the space connects



A side view of the safe space built in Bantè, Benin.

young people to essential supports not available in their villages. It is one of four municipal-level safe spaces established through the P4G project, with one built in each participating commune.

Casimir Akomonla, chairman of the Social Affairs Commission at Bantè town hall and a formal ally of the P4G project, admits that he was surprised by the scope of the facility. The space features a 102-square-metre hall with seating for 70, a listening room for confidential conversations, a computer room that doubles as a library, gender-specific and accessible restrooms and green outdoor areas.

“It’s a project that takes into account all the groups it works with in the communities,” says Akomonla. “For people with disabilities, there’s a ramp that meets their needs. It’s also easy for children to integrate. When they’re here, they feel at ease.”

He explains that the listening room allows girls to speak privately with midwives and social-service providers so they can share concerns and receive guidance.

“This is important,” he adds, “because we live in a community where taboos are still the rule.”

Today, the Bantè safe space hosts a variety of activities, including Girls Advisory Committee meetings, community education sessions, vocational training and income-generating projects. Girls learn practical skills like making tomato purée (a Beninese staple) and creating fashion accessories such as handbags and jewellery. Jacqueline is a regular here, gaining knowledge and skills to bring back to girls in her community.

One day, after leading a training session in her village, she was approached by a few participants. They were excited by what they’d learned from her and wanted to see the Bantè centre for themselves.

Jacqueline turned to her brother, who quickly rallied other boys to help. The next day, five motorbikes set out, each carrying two girls and a driver.

When the convoy arrived at their destination, Jacqueline led the group to the building and up the gleaming white steps. She paused beneath the sign that read, “A Safe Space for the Young People of Bantè.” The head of the GUPS greeted them warmly.

"She told us that if we ever faced problems or needed help, we could always come speak with her," Jacqueline recalls. "She told us to never be ashamed. She was there for us."

Built to last

P4G is set to conclude in 2025, but Akomonla is confident that the safe space in Bantè will continue to serve girls well beyond the project's end. Local stakeholders have worked to develop a co-management agreement for the four commune-level safe spaces, laying the groundwork for long-term sustainability.

As part of this agreement, each commune will establish a Safe Space Management Committee, comprising three members of the Girls Advisory Committee, the local mayor, the head of the GUPS and the director of the municipal health centre. This leadership body will oversee daily operations and manage funds, whether allocated by the municipality or generated by renting the space when not in use by girls' groups. Forty-five percent of this income will directly support girls' initiatives, with the remainder covering operational costs and both minor and major repairs.

Akomonla notes that the space will be open to all girls' associations in Bantè, and its future will be shaped by the girls themselves.



Akomonla works alongside Girls Advisory Committee members at a community sensitization event.

“When they come from their communities to the town centre, they know they have a meeting place. They can engage in the activities they choose. There is freedom, autonomy and a key to open the door.”

—CASIMIR AKOMONLA

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