



Until we are all equal

Health awareness initiatives keep girls in school by preventing child, early and forced marriages and pregnancies.



# Plan for Girls in Benin

Supporting girls' well-being  
for better school attendance

## Project Facts

**WHAT:** The Plan for Girls project in Benin aims to help protect and support girls and young women ages 10–24 who live in challenging circumstances.

**HOW:** The project seeks to:

- Provide scholarships so that girls can attend school.
- Raise awareness about gender-based violence and ways to reduce it.
- Offer vocational training so that young women can earn a living and reduce financial barriers.
- Increase girls' knowledge about their sexual and reproductive health.

**WHERE:** We work in 60 villages in four communes of Benin, including Bante, Dassa-Zoumé, Glazoue and Savalou.

**WHEN:** We have completed Year 5 of this eight-year project (2018–2025).

**WHO:** Our funding partner in this \$19 million project is Global Affairs Canada. Local partners that conduct agricultural training and educational awareness discussions include DEDRAS and RACINES.

## CONTENTS

### 4 The Situation

Gender bias and poverty are holding girls back in Benin. We're supporting girls' education to help them succeed.

### 6 The Rundown

Read about what the project has accomplished so far.

### 8 Breaking Sexual-Health Taboos

Majoie is speaking out to prevent early pregnancies.

### 10 Taking the Future into Their Own Hands

Young mothers are finding financial independence in soap making.

### 11 Looking Ahead

Three girls work together in school.



Girl leaders march on the Day of the African Child.

# The Situation

Gender biases, poverty and early pregnancies are holding girls back in Benin. Supporting their education is key in helping them succeed.

From its beaches lined with palm trees in the south to its rugged grasslands in the north, Benin is a West African country of diverse landscapes as well as cultures; about one-quarter of the country's 12 million people follow the voodoo religion, while the rest practise Roman Catholicism and Islam. Because of Benin's colonial past, French is the official language, but tribal languages such as Fon are also commonly spoken.

Benin is one of Africa's most stable democracies and also one of the poorest countries in the world. It relies largely on agriculture and cotton production and has relatively few industries, exports and employment opportunities. This contributes to an ongoing cycle of poverty, which is exacerbated by deeply ingrained gender inequalities.

Although women's rights are recognized in the country's constitution and child, early and forced marriage is banned, oppressive gender roles and social norms persist. Girls are usually expected by their families to grow up to become unpaid caregivers rather than contribute to their households financially.

In addition, they have limited access to sexual and reproductive health education, which can lead to early or



A community in northwestern Benin

forced marriages as well as early and unplanned pregnancies. Consequently, girls often drop out of school and become financially dependent on others. And even when they do pursue educational and economic opportunities, they often come up against gender discrimination. This restricts their participation in not only the economy but also social and political spaces.

According to the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Analysis of Benin, in the Collines Department, where the Plan for Girls in Benin project is active, women are disproportionately represented in its high poverty rate of 46%. And when immersed in the daily realities of poverty, girls and young women face greater risks of child, early and forced marriages, unwanted pregnancies and domestic violence. They also struggle to access quality health care, further jeopardizing their health and well-being.

## KEY CHALLENGES IN BENIN

➤ Benin ranks **166 out of 189** countries in the **Human Development Index** (a tool that measures the health, level of education and standard of living of a country's people).

➤ In 2020, only **33%** of secondary-school-age girls were **enrolled in school**.

➤ **1.2 million** (or **30%**) of married women ages **20–24** were married **before the age of 18**.

## YEAR 5 PROGRESS

This year, Plan International placed a greater emphasis on economic justice to address girls' and young women's ongoing lack of access to education, vocational training opportunities and sustainable livelihoods. We provided hundreds of girls and young women with training on income-generating activities that they had identified as profitable in local markets. (Read how this helped Sabine kick-start her soap-making business on page 10.)

In addition, the Plan for Girls in Benin project found that parents and children weren't discussing sexual and reproductive health topics, which allows misinformation, health risks and stigma to persist. (Turn to page 8 to hear how Majoie is speaking up to help change this in her community.) Plan International is opening the dialogue by arranging educational talks in schools and learning centres, hosting intergenerational community

sessions and conducting awareness campaigns – particularly among parents.

## THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

As we complete Year 5 of this eight-year project, we are grateful for your support. With your generous contributions, we have helped thousands of girls and young women attend school, stay healthy and become financially independent. We have worked with thousands of parents, boys and leaders to improve gender equality – at home and throughout communities. And together, we have trained hundreds of influential community players, including child-protection aides, school staff, social-service providers and municipal authorities, to support the well-being and safety of girls. Thank you for trusting us to carry out this important work and for your dedication to championing adolescent girls, their rights and their chance for economic justice in Benin.



Plan for Girls project participants attend a youth savings and loan association meeting.

**Thank you for your continued support.**

“Because of the Plan Canada project, my confidence has grown. One of my proudest achievements as a participant in the project is that I have sensitized about 100 parents in my community about getting all girls to go to school. Thanks to this activity, girls who had dropped out of school have returned to class.”

– Aline, president of a girls' advisory committee and a farmer in Dassa-Zoumé



A girl speaks at the presentation ceremony of the women-empowerment centre in Dassa-Zoumé.

# The Rundown

The Plan for Girls project in Benin has already reached 24,486 participants, including 11,194 girls ages 10–24 and 3,199 women ages 25 and up!

## PASSING THE MEGAPHONE TO YOUTH

Due to traditional social norms and pervasive gender inequality, girls in Benin often feel like they don't have a voice. But with Plan International's support, Champions of Change clubs and Girls' Advisory Committees led 278 initiatives in Year 5 that helped lift stifling stigmas and shatter harmful silences, amplifying girls' needs, goals and rights.

And youth rallied around the call.

In the commune of Zogbodomey, young people included a campaign against gender discrimination in a traditional festival. In Glazoué, youth organized a friendly boys and girls football match to raise awareness about gender equality, while some Girls' Advisory Committees worked with police to deliver talks about sexual harassment.

"We hear many stories about cases of harassment in our community, but unfortunately, girls are afraid to report," says Hermine, the president of a Girls' Advisory Committee in Savalou. "This is why we decided to organize this activity – to talk about it with our peers and inform them about how they can report it."

## DID YOU KNOW?

We work with Girls' Advisory Committees in 60 villages in Benin. Committee members share their insights into local culture and lifestyle to inform the project design. As leaders in their communities, they also encourage others to participate and assist project staff in adapting and successfully rolling out activities.

## SUPPORTING SURVIVORS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence affects large numbers of girls in Benin, but it's common for them not to report incidents due to social stigma or not knowing how to get help.

As part of our work to raise awareness about and reduce gender-based violence, Plan International partnered with a psychologist and university professor to train 12 staff members of child-protective service centres from all six communes within the Collines Department. The participants learned how to enhance their listening skills with survivors of gender-based violence.

The project team also provided the centres with a motorcycle so staff could travel to and reach those requiring assistance, including survivors of gender-based violence.



## THE BEST INVESTMENT OF ALL

Financial management is key to a successful business. That's why Plan International has supported the creation and training of more than 70 community savings and loan groups, which provide a practical and sustainable means for community members to control their flow of funds.

In the past year, a total of 58 youth savings and loan groups completed their first savings cycle (investment, growth, return) and received further training in activities such as accounting and bookkeeping. The Plan for Girls project also provided members of school co-operatives with ongoing training in entrepreneurship and life skills as well as support in launching their income-generating businesses, like soap making.

In the Collines Department, nine women and one man from a savings and loan group were able to secure 1,100,000 CFA francs (over CAD\$2,400) for their members. The beneficiaries were then trained in how to manage their capital and allocate expenses for their small businesses.



• **6,348** girls and boys received training in adolescent sexual and reproductive health through talks at school and in other learning spaces.

• More than **2,800** girls and boys participated in Champions of Change club sessions, which covered topics such as the prevention of gender-based violence and child, early and forced marriage.

• **1,022** educational talks were delivered by teachers who were trained to discuss self-esteem in relationships and critical health information as well as share sexual-health materials.

• **450** girls were given training by schools and government groups in child and youth safeguarding, gender equality and protection from violence.

• **48** village safe spaces were created where girls can discuss sensitive subjects such as sexual and reproductive health and receive guidance and support.

• **400** girls took part in entrepreneurship training, mainly through school co-operatives.

• **179** girls received skills training in income-generating activities, including the production and marketing of soy products, spices, fruit juices and yogourts.

• **4,765** parents were reached through training, awareness campaigns and intergenerational conversations to support gender equality, identify gender-based violence and learn how to help prevent early pregnancies.

• **203** key service providers, including male and female health workers and members of the judicial system, completed training in safeguarding, gender equality, preventing gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health.

• **12** gender-separate school latrines were constructed with access ramps and stocked with period supplies.

A STORY OF CHANGE

# Breaking Sexual-Health Taboos

This young activist is speaking out to prevent early pregnancies.

From the time she became a teenager, 19-year-old Majoie wanted to learn more about sexual and reproductive health. But in the village where she grew up, in the Dassa-Zoumé commune of Benin, it's considered taboo to discuss these topics, even between parents and children. Because she couldn't ask the adults in her life, Majoie turned to friends for information.

"When the girls got together, we all shared our experiences on sex-related subjects, especially contraceptive methods," explains Majoie. "Often, it was the information given by the older girls that we took to be true."

But this information often proved to be unreliable, leading to early and unwanted pregnancies. As a result, girls dropped out of school or vocational training programs. After attending monthly educational talks organized by the Plan for Girls project, Majoie decided she wanted to help change that.

In the sessions, she learned about protection from sexually transmitted infections, menstrual hygiene and

contraceptive methods. She found it so valuable that she decided to become a sexual and reproductive health activist and share her knowledge with her peers so that they, too, could better understand their bodies and their rights.

Now Majoie uses Plan for Girls workshops, which are usually attended by 30-plus young people, to regularly share information about practicing healthy and responsible sex. She has also helped organize awareness-raising activities in her community.

"I love taking part in the sessions," Majoie says. "The authorities need to support the educational talks and extend them to include all the communes. This will enable young girls and boys to complete their schooling and apprenticeships so that they can participate in the development of their communities."

Majoie knows the best way forward, and now Plan for Girls is helping her forge the path.

“

I love taking part in the talk sessions. The authorities need to support the educational talks and extend them to include all the communes ... so that girls and boys can participate in the development of their communities.”

– Majoie, a project participant



Majoie is educating girls and young women in her community about safe sex.

A STORY OF CHANGE

# Taking the Future into Their Own Hands

Soap production is helping young mothers like Sabine find a way to financial independence.

Sabine is 20 years old, but she has already experienced huge setbacks in her life. After the birth of her first child, she dropped out of school. Then, after she gave birth to her second child, she suffered a heart attack and spent more than three months in a coma. When she awoke, she couldn't walk or communicate as before and required extensive rehabilitation.

Sabine's parents were supportive of their daughter; her father even offered to stay home to take care of her after she was discharged from the hospital. But Sabine knew it would be difficult for him to do that, as he had other responsibilities. She wanted to make her own way in life. So she enrolled in the Plan for Girls project's soap-production training course. "I didn't want to depend on his promise, which is why I seized this opportunity," Sabine says.

Along with Sabine, hundreds of girls are receiving training through Plan International in income-generating opportunities – all of which are tailored to their local markets. In addition to those learning how to make solid and liquid soap, other young women are discovering how to create market gardens, raise livestock, manufacture soybean products and create jewellery.

In the Collines Department of Benin, where Sabine lives, girls face economic challenges due to a lack of education and job opportunities as well as gender-based discrimination and restrictive social norms. The project's skills-training programs are helping financially support young women so that they have more autonomy to make decisions in their lives.

Now, Sabine has a team of people who are helping her achieve her dream. This team includes her business instructors, her parents (who help her get to and from her sessions each day) and her siblings, who sell her products in their village.

"I'm very happy that my daughter can take part in this training," Sabine's father says. "I'm planning to help her open a store once she has finished her training so she can market her products. I'll even do some advertising to attract customers, as I want her to succeed in everything she undertakes, especially after all she's been through."

Today, Sabine's future is in her own hands. She is taking confident steps toward her goals with every soap product she creates.



"I seized this opportunity," says Sabine, a 20-year-old mother of two who wants to open her own store and sell her handmade soap products.

## Looking Ahead

Every girl has the right to an education and to lead a safe, healthy life. The Plan for Girls project in Benin will continue to use a multi-faceted approach to reduce the barriers that prevent girls and young women from getting an education. Plan International will also continue to support their access to sexual and reproductive health knowledge and services, open opportunities for financial independence and help collectively shift community attitudes about gender roles.

**In Year 6, we also plan to:**

- Finalize construction of latrines for schools, encouraging greater safety and enrolment.
- Renovate school classrooms, creating more accommodating environments that are conducive to learning.
- Finalize construction of four safe-space centres.
- Provide health clinics with contraceptives and medical equipment to better support girls' health.

## Thank you!

Plan International is committed to supporting girls and young women in overcoming barriers to education and achieving their potential while staying healthy and safe. We are grateful to our community of donors for allowing us to continue vital programming in Benin, creating important changes for generations to come. None of this work would be possible without your support.

**Thank you again for your commitment to the education, health, safety and well-being of girls and young women. With your partnership, we not only have a Plan for Girls in Benin, but we're helping girls and young women make their own plans a reality.**

“I’m very happy that my daughter can take part in this training. I want her to succeed in everything she undertakes, especially after all she’s been through.”

– Father of Sabine, a project participant



**Plan International Canada**  
245 Eglinton Ave East, Suite 300  
Toronto, Ontario  
M4P 0B3  
416-920-1654 | 1-800-387-1418



© 2024 Plan International Canada Inc. The Plan International Canada name, associated trademarks and logos are trademarks of Plan International Canada Inc. The Standards Program Trustmark is a mark of Imagine Canada used under the license by Plan International Canada.



**Plan International staff gather with youth participants in Dassa-Zoumé.**

**For more information, please contact:**  
[philanthropy@plancanada.ca](mailto:philanthropy@plancanada.ca)

## About Plan International Canada

Plan International Canada is a member of a global organization dedicated to advancing children's rights and equality for girls. Plan International has been building powerful partnerships with and for children for over 85 years and is now active in more than 80 countries. We stand with children, especially girls, wherever they are oppressed, exploited, left behind or not equally valued. We're determined optimists, and we will continue to persevere until we are all equal.