



At her training centre, Héléne is gaining skills in computers and graphic design.

PLAN FOR GIRLS CASE STUDY: BENIN

Dreaming Without Limits

In the heart of Benin's Collines region, one girl ventures beyond the familiar, opening new doors for herself and her peers.

As a young girl, Héléne rarely imagined life beyond her village. The small cluster of hamlets in the commune of Glazoué lacked electricity, and the only road to town became impassable during the rainy season. Most families were subsistence farmers. Children worked alongside their parents in the fields, learning to coax cassava and maize from the red soil.

Héléne was born with a motor disability, which continues to be a challenge at 23. In school, she endured teasing from classmates and isolated

herself to avoid ridicule. She focused on her studies, excelling academically and becoming one of the few girls in her village to complete lower secondary school (grades 7 to 9). But when she brought home her certificate, she decided it would be her last one.

"I knew my father couldn't afford to pay for university," Héléne explains, "so I decided to learn a trade instead." She left school and turned to textile weaving, hoping to master the traditional craft and earn a living making scarves, like many girls in the village.

In contexts where greater value is placed on educating boys, some girls may internalize these norms and limit their own ambitions. Fewer than 28% of girls in Benin complete lower secondary school.¹ While Héléne's father tried to educate all his daughters, his two eldest dropped out and had early pregnancies. He feared Héléne would follow the same path – until a project emerged presenting new possibilities.

In 2019, Glazoué joined the Plan for Girls (P4G) project alongside three other communes in central Benin.² Introduced by Plan International, P4G was designed to amplify girls' voices and unlock their potential to lead change in their communities. Girls wouldn't merely take part in the project; they would actively shape its direction to ensure it met their needs.

As a first step, a Girls Advisory Committee would be established in each commune, with villages electing one or two girls to help guide the project on behalf of their peers. To ensure representation from girls across all cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, with a special focus on disadvantaged groups, the project team worked with village leaders in identifying potential candidates.

Héléne was impressed by the project's focus on important issues for girls – early and forced marriage, unintended pregnancies, domestic violence – though she doubted her ability to contribute.

The village chief saw her differently. He went to her home and encouraged her to come forward as a nominee.

A few days later, Héléne found herself at the village assembly surrounded by a crowd of 50 community members who had gathered to vote. There were girls and boys, parents and local leaders from every corner of the village. Héléne kept to herself, quietly observing the proceedings. Then, as the votes were counted, she heard her name called out – clear and unmistakable. It was her high level of education that had set her apart from the other candidates. Her peers had chosen her to be their spokesperson.



TOP: Héléne officially joins the Girls Advisory Committee for Glazoué.

MIDDLE: Girls take part in a P4G workshop in Glazoué.

BOTTOM: Héléne and her father.

1 <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/benin>

2 The three other communes involved in the P4G project were Bantè, Dassa-Zoumé and Savalou in the Collines department in central Benin. A total of 60 villages participated in the project.

Learning to connect

The P4G Girls Advisory Committee for the commune of Glazoué was made up of 19 girls who were from different villages³ and ranged in age from 13 to 23. Among them were students, apprentices, shop assistants, young mothers, married women and girls who were neither in school nor working. They met at Glazoué's school district office, next to the town hall. For Hélène, it was unfamiliar territory. She had rarely left her village and had never interacted with such a diverse group of girls before.

In their first meetings, the P4G project team introduced committee members to the core principles of gender equality, inclusion and child and youth protection. They also explored advocacy skills like teamwork, public speaking, engaging with authorities and, most importantly, building self-confidence.

This training set the stage for the project's "prioritization workshops," in which Girls Advisory Committees from all four communes would come together to identify the key challenges facing girls and propose solutions. Their shared needs, aspirations and priorities would form the basis of

a document to guide all future project activities, a manifesto they would call the *Plan for Girls*.

"I realized that women can work, fight and accomplish what men can do," says Hélène, reflecting on her workshop experience. She came away with a deep sense of responsibility toward the girls in her village. "As committee members, it was our job to defend our rights."

Members of the Girls Advisory Committee were tasked with sharing their newfound knowledge with peers in their communities. They would lead awareness campaigns, educational talks and advocacy around the key issues outlined in the *Plan for Girls*.

For Hélène, speaking up had always been challenging. Her disability had made it difficult to connect with classmates. But the Girls Advisory Committee brought together girls from different backgrounds – some with disabilities, some without – and she was amazed by how well they bonded.

"The experience helped me let go of the judgments I used to have about myself, which had kept me from interacting with others," she says. "That's when I realized that wherever I go, I shouldn't exclude myself or anyone else."



LEFT: Hélène addresses the P4G team and local leaders during a project meeting.



RIGHT: Hélène leading a workshop on children's rights.

³ The Girls Advisory Committees for the communes of Glazoué, Savalou and Dassa-Zoumè each had 19 girls, and the committee for the commune of Bantè had 18 girls. In all, there were 75 girls elected to the Girls Advisory Committees in Benin.

Stepping beyond boundaries

Hélène began hosting monthly awareness sessions on girls' rights at the village primary and secondary schools. She encouraged girls to recognize their potential and led practical training in soap making and snack preparation, helping them earn their own income and assert their independence. In doing so, Hélène reshaped her own ambitions.

With her level of education, she could pursue computer skills and graphic design, which offered better earning potential and less competition than the weaving trade. But there were no computer training programs in her village. To follow this path, she would have to leave home.

"No one in our community worked in this field. That motivated me," she explains. "I also had the support of the P4G project team leader, who guided and advised me."

Within months of joining the P4G project, Hélène enrolled in a three-year program in data entry, computer maintenance and graphic design. The training centre was 35 kilometres from her village, and she rented a room nearby. Her father was thrilled with her decision and sent money every month to cover tuition and expenses.

Despite living far from home, Hélène stayed active in the Girls Advisory Committee, returning on weekends to lead sessions. She also educated fellow apprentices at the training centre on preventing unplanned pregnancies. Pregnant girls were required to take a year's leave, though most eventually abandoned their training due to a lack of family support. Hélène was determined to help her peers complete the program.

Since joining the Girls Advisory Committee, she has taken on successive leadership roles and now serves on the P4G Resource Mobilization Committee, ensuring that girl leaders have the funding they need for their activities. She also



Hélène puts her new skills to use, supporting others at a P4G computer training session.

advises the project team on strategies to boost the participation of girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. Her impact in the community hasn't gone unnoticed. The village chief, who first invited Hélène to join the project, sees her influence even within his own household.

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“When my daughters talk to me, I don't feel they are afraid anymore. They express themselves freely. I think it's because they attend her sessions.”

—VILLAGE CHIEF

As Hélène nears the end of her apprenticeship, she's focused on saving to open her own workshop, though she has yet to choose a location.

"I used to think life was limited to my village, that there was nothing beyond it," she says. "But now I see that there's a future ahead. We can grow, travel and experience new things that will help us evolve."

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