

PLAN FOR GIRLS 2018–2025

Lessons from an Integrated, Girl-Led Pilot Project in Benin and Cameroon



A youth advocate in Benin participates in a leadership training session.

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Girl leaders in Cameroon.

Introduction: Insights from the Plan for Girls Project

A pilot initiative in Benin and Cameroon offers vital lessons for girls' empowerment.

Background

Adolescence is a pivotal time in a girl's life, marked by both challenges and opportunities. Globally, nearly one in five adolescent girls is out of school,¹ but every year of secondary education can increase their future earning potential by 18%.² Adolescent girls are twice as likely as boys to be disengaged from education, employment or training.³

Meanwhile, 37,000 girls under 18 are married each day, and pregnancy complications remain the leading cause of death for girls aged 15 to 19.⁴

Research shows that investing in adolescent girls is key to building a more just and equitable world,⁵ but girls are often overlooked in government policies and services, and development programs rarely empower them to shape their own futures.

- 1 EFA Global Monitoring Report and UNESCO UIS; "Progress in getting all children to school stalls but some countries show the way forward." EFA GMR and UNESCO UIS Policy Paper 14/Fact Sheet 28, July 2014.
- 2 <https://pmnch.who.int/docs/librariesprovider9/meeting-reports/make-adolescent-well-being-a-priority-en.pdf>
- 3 <https://www.unicef.org/media/153476/file/Five-Game-Changing-Priorities-With-and-For-Adolescent-Girls.pdf>
- 4 <https://www.who.int/health-topics/adolescent-health/pregnancy-and-childbirth-complications-are-the-leading-cause-of-death-among-15-19-year-old-girls>
- 5 Every \$1 spent on contraceptive services in the developing world would save \$2.30 on maternal and newborn health care thanks to a decline in unplanned pregnancies (<https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2017/06/critical-moment-increase-investments-meeting-womens-family-planning-needs>). When 10% more girls in a country attend school, the country's GDP increases by an average of 3% (USAID, 2011). Evidence has also shown that when women participate in the financial system, they are better able to manage risk, start or invest in a business and fund social expenditures (<https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/climate-change-and-women-farmers-burkina-faso>).

The project

In 2018, Plan International launched the **“Plan for Girls”** (P4G) project, **a girl-led initiative** designed with and for adolescent girls. Supported by Global Affairs Canada, the project aimed to amplify girls’ voices and unlock their potential to drive change in their families and communities.

P4G was piloted at a decentralized level in two countries in West and Central Africa: Benin and Cameroon. It targeted regions where adolescent girls face acute poverty, limited opportunities and a socio-legal landscape heavily influenced by discriminatory gender norms. In this challenging context, the project brought adolescent girls together with local authorities, development actors and community members to collectively draw up a **“Plan for Girls,”** an essential package of interventions tailored to the needs, aspirations and priorities identified by the girls themselves.

Unlike traditional development approaches, which focus on individual sectors, P4G adopted a **uniquely integrated approach** to simultaneously address the complex barriers to girls’ empowerment and the root causes of gender inequality and poverty.⁶ With the goal of providing comprehensive support for girls’ well-being, the project spanned **four critical sectors** (which are among Plan International’s six Areas of Global Distinctiveness):

1. **Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)**
2. **Protection**
3. **Education**
4. **Economic empowerment**

Purpose of this document

In this series of fact sheets, we share the key achievements, challenges and lessons learned from the seven-year journey of the P4G project. Our goal is to inform future programming, offering practical insights for scaling and adapting the model in other settings.

The fact sheets are structured around three core features of the project:

- **Innovative strategies for girls’ empowerment**
- **The potential of a girl-led approach**
- **An integrated, multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral project model**

This resource draws on a variety of data sources, including discussions with current and former project staff and advisors in Benin, Cameroon and Canada as well as interviews and focus groups with project participants and community stakeholders. In addition, monitoring data and findings from the impact evaluation are incorporated to achieve a clear and comprehensive understanding of the project’s outcomes.



Girls in Cameroon gather after a health workshop, where they made bracelets to understand and track their menstrual cycles.

⁶ Breaking the Silos: Cross-sectoral partnerships for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); ECOSOC Chamber; Issues note; 31 March 2017

PROJECT DETAILS

- **Donor:** Global Affairs Canada
- **Budget:** C\$18 million
- **Duration:** 2018–2025
- **Project countries:** Benin and Cameroon (60 villages in each country)
- **Participants:** Adolescent girls and young women (ages 10 to 24), adolescent boys and young men (10 to 24) and adult men and women, including parents, teachers, health care providers, child protection actors, local government agents and community leaders
- **NGO implementing partners:**

BENIN

 1. **RACINES** (Recherches, Actions Communautaires, Initiatives Pour un Nouvel Espoir / Research, Community Actions, Initiatives for Renewed Hope)
 2. **DEDRAS** (Organisation pour le Développement Durable, le Renforcement et l'Autopromotion des Structures Communautaire / Organization for the Sustainable Development, Strengthening and Self-Promotion of Community Structures)

CAMEROON

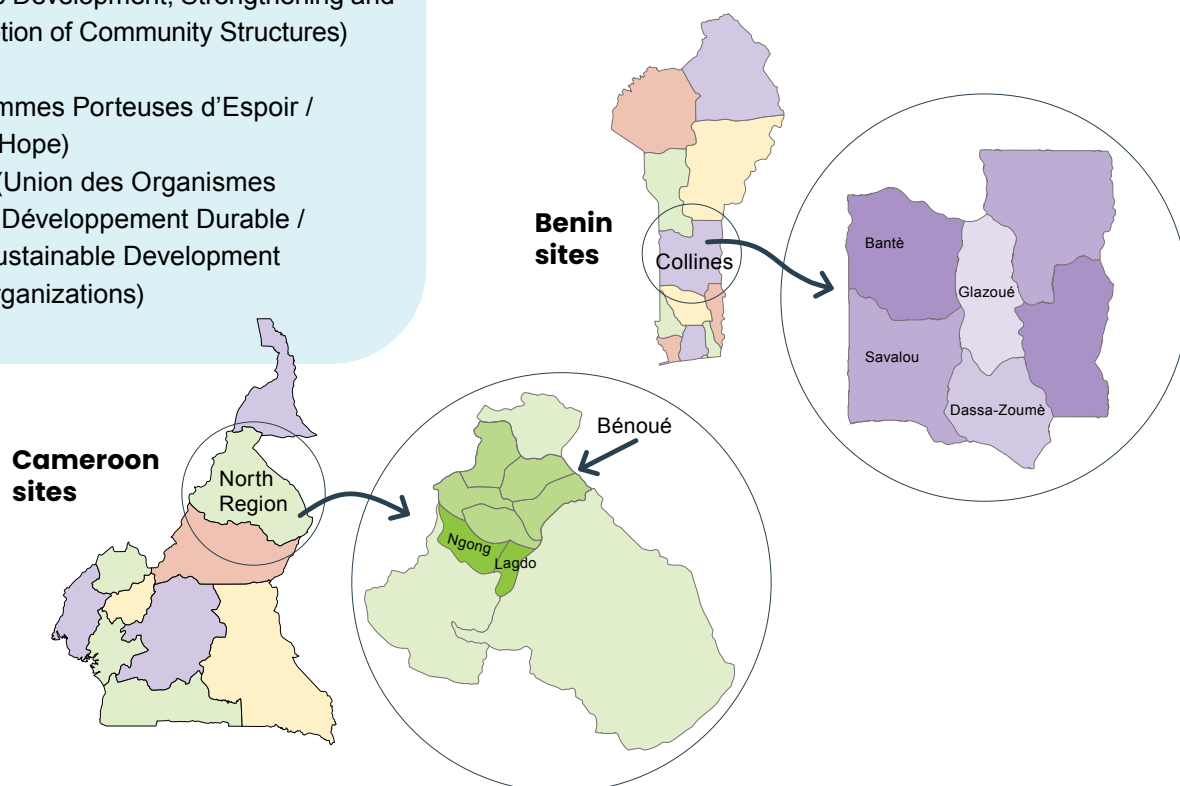
 1. **FEPES** (Femmes Porteuses d'Espoir / Women of Hope)
 2. **UNOADD** (Union des Organismes d'Appui au Développement Durable / Union of Sustainable Development Support Organizations)



P4G participants dance during the opening of a new project-built safe space.

Project locations

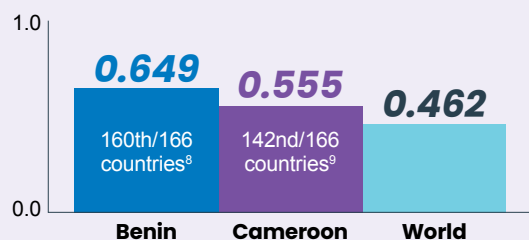
The P4G project was strategically implemented in communities where it could have the most impact. In Benin, Plan International focused on four communes⁷ in the central Collines department – Bantè, Dassa-Zoumé, Savalou and Glazoué – chosen for their strong community support and need for targeted interventions. In Cameroon, the project was based in two northern communes, Lagdo and Ngong, within the Bénoué department. The selection of these sites was based on key criteria – including accessibility to education and health infrastructure – as well as road accessibility, ensuring that the project could reach the most underserved and geographically viable villages.



⁷ In the context of Benin and Cameroon, a commune is a local administrative division responsible for governing a specific area and managing public services.

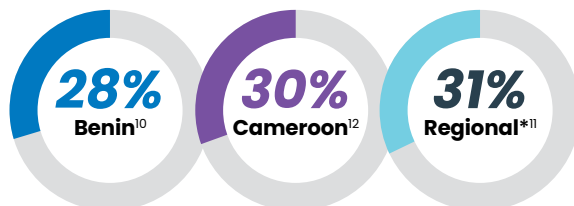
Key challenges in Benin and Cameroon

UN's Gender Inequality Index (GII)



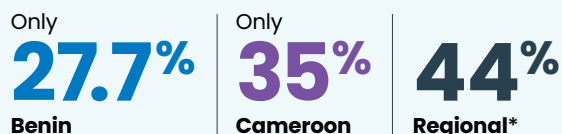
The *GII* measures inequalities in reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market, with higher rankings representing greater inequality.

Percentage of women ages 20–24 who were first married or in union before age 18



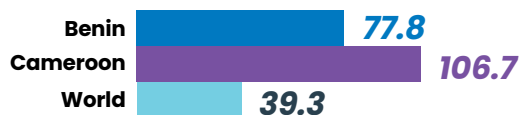
*Sub-Saharan Africa

Percentage of girls who complete lower secondary school

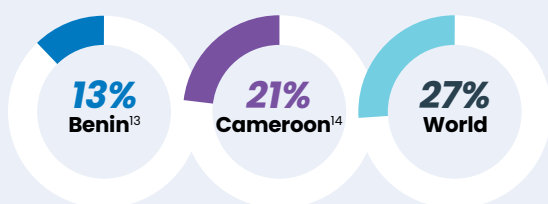


*Sub-Saharan Africa

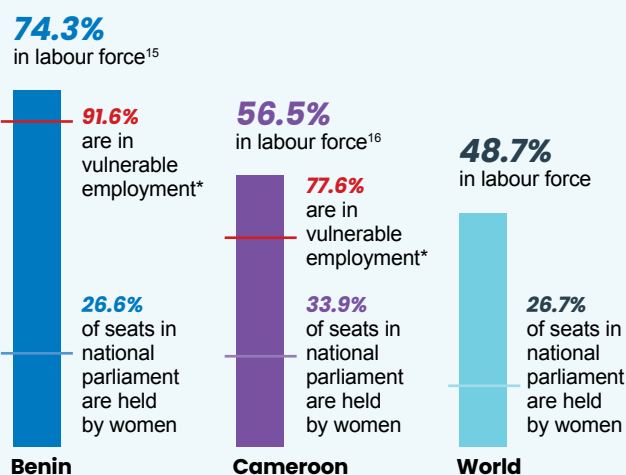
Adolescent fertility rates (Births per 1,000 women ages 15–19)



Percentage of women and girls ages 15–49 who have experienced intimate partner violence



Percentage of females ages 15 and older who participate in the labour force



*This means they are the least likely to have formal work arrangements, social protection, and safety nets to guard against economic shocks.

“

My dream is for us to be **financially independent, influential and respected women** contributing to the development of our community.”

—PROJECT PARTICIPANT, 20, DASSA-ZOUMÉ, BENIN

8 <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/BEN>
 9 <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/CMR>
 10 <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/atlas/benin/>
 11 <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/atlas/>
 12 <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/atlas/cameroon/>
 13 <https://www.unfpa.org/GBV-dashboard/countries/BJ>
 14 <https://www.unfpa.org/GBV-dashboard/countries/CM>
 15 <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/benin>
 16 <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/cameroon>

P4G's approach to supporting girls' rights and well-being

P4G aimed to advance the rights and well-being of adolescent girls through an integrated, replicable and proven “**Plan for Girls.**” To achieve this, the project implemented interventions across three areas:

1. **Empowering adolescent girls** to make informed decisions about their rights and futures.
2. **Creating a supportive social environment** by engaging key influencers and duty bearers – such as parents, families, male peers, teachers, health and protection workers and community and religious leaders – to reinforce positive change.
3. **Strengthening institutions** to ensure greater accountability and responsiveness to the rights of adolescent girls.

Driving collective action for girls' empowerment

Understanding the complex systems of power that impact girls' rights, the project engaged a wide range of stakeholders at every level – individuals, families, peers (both female and male), communities, institutions and governance structures – to foster lasting change. Key ministries and municipal bodies were actively involved during the planning phase. They also contributed to annual work planning, ensuring that activities aligned with both the priorities of the girls and the broader goals of local, regional and national governments.



A community in northwestern Benin.

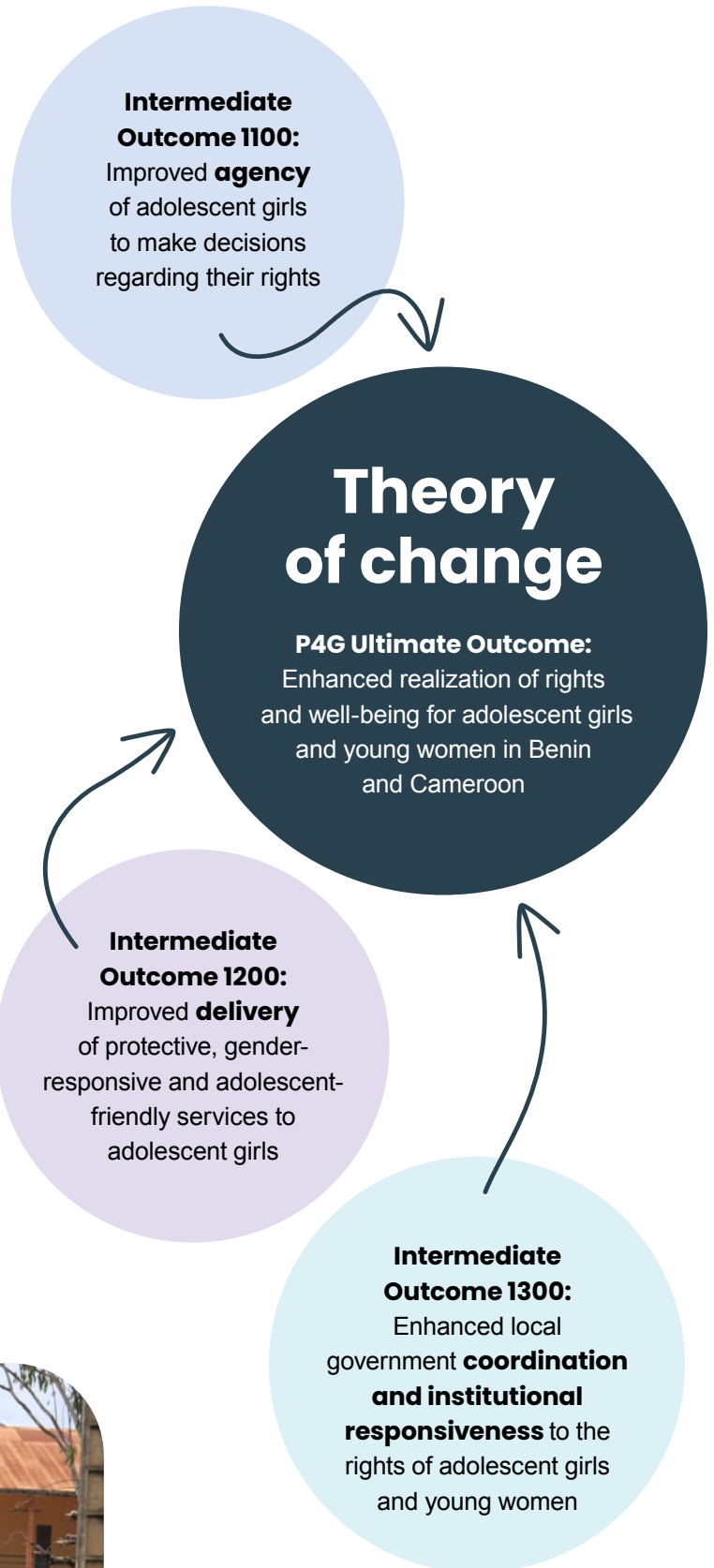
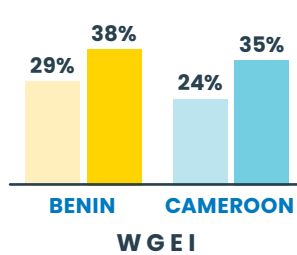


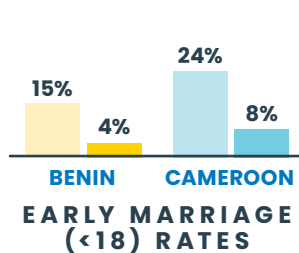
FIGURE 1. P4G's theory of change

The impact

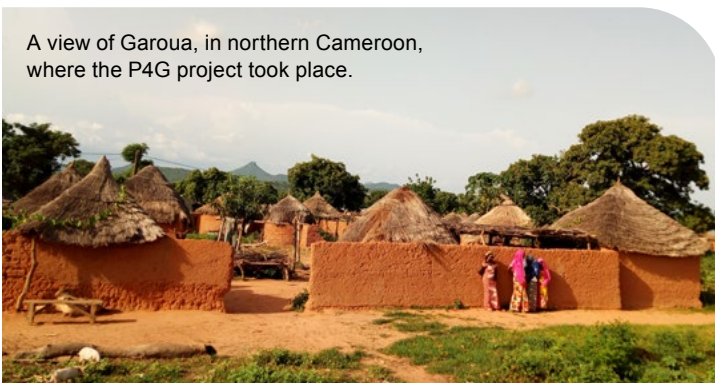
To understand the extent to which adolescent girls and young women in project areas are able to actualize their rights, the project created a women and girls' empowerment index (WGEI), with questions on gender norms and roles, access to services, control of resources, participation and decision making, and institutional support. From baseline to end of project, the scores of adolescent girls and young women in project communities increased from **29% to 38% in Benin** and from **24% to 35% in Cameroon**, while scores in comparison areas dropped or saw minimal gains.



Early marriage rates, another important indicator for girls' rights, also saw progress in project communities. While **15%** of women aged 18 to 22 in Benin and **24%** of women aged 18 to 22 in Cameroon were married before the age of 18 at baseline, these rates had dropped to **4% in Benin** and **8% in Cameroon** by end of project. These results were achieved despite an increasing percentage of girls being married before the age of 18 in comparison areas.



A view of Garoua, in northern Cameroon, where the P4G project took place.



MORE EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

1. The percentage of adolescent girls and young women with equitable attitudes and perceptions regarding gender roles and responsibilities more than doubled from baseline to end of project in both **Benin (20% to 54%)** and **Cameroon (13% to 27%)** intervention areas, while comparison areas saw minimal or no improvement.
2. The percentage of adolescent girls and young women with access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services and resources more than tripled in intervention areas from baseline to end of project in both **Benin (from 9% to 30%)** and **Cameroon (from 6% to 31%)**, compared to modest or no gains in comparison areas.
3. The percentage of young women aged 20 to 24 engaged in income-generating activities outside of the home increased in both **Benin (16% to 27%)** and **Cameroon (19% to 28%)**, while comparison areas saw minor gains or a decrease.
4. The percentage of adolescent girls and young women with critical life skills such as self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as communication, goal-setting, problem-solving, and leadership skills increased from **10% to 30% in Benin** (more than double the increase seen in comparison areas), and from **26% to 37% in Cameroon** (where comparison zones saw a drop of almost 10%).
5. In project areas, local government stakeholders added over **100 actions (55 in Benin, 46 in Cameroon)** addressing the needs of adolescent girls and young women to official plans and budgets. Examples include the construction of school latrines and boreholes, the provision of electricity, support for female entrepreneurs and youth associations, and the creation of safe spaces for girls.

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Girl leaders in Benin march on Day of the African Child.

Piloting the Plan for Girls Model

Girls lead the way through an innovative project focused on their voices and priorities.

Launched in 2018, the P4G initiative placed adolescent girls at the centre of both project design and implementation. Drawing inspiration from Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy – adopted the year prior – the project aimed to foster a culture of innovation where women and girls were not just participants but also active creators of change.

Elsie Segla, the P4G project manager in Benin, led the initiative from its inception. She notes that in shaping interventions, traditional development approaches often exclude the voices of the target group.

“

“P4G was innovative because its activities were co-created with the girls. They envisioned their ideal life and community, and together, we designed activities based on their dreams and aspirations.”

–**ELSIE SEGLA,**
P4G PROJECT MANAGER, BENIN

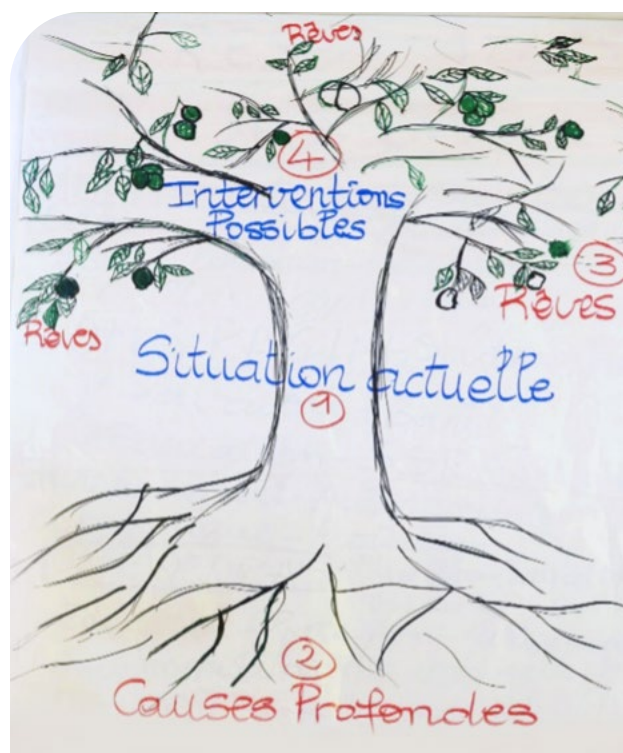
This fact sheet will highlight the most innovative aspects of the P4G project in Benin and Cameroon, focusing on its integrated and flexible approach as well as the extensive consultations that were central to its start-up phase. It will outline the development of the *Plan for Girls* – an essential package of interventions for girls – and key features of its implementation model. Finally, it will reflect on the project’s successes and challenges as well as the lessons learned over the course of the seven-year pilot.

Project design

The P4G project stands out for its **integrated and flexible approach**, designed to address the complex realities that adolescent girls face. While traditional international programs frequently compartmentalize interventions into single-sector projects focused on health, education or livelihoods, these challenges are deeply interconnected. Issues such as poor health, lack of education and unemployment are not isolated; they are part of a broader social and economic landscape and reinforce each other.

Plan International often incorporates elements of different sectors into programming – for example, an education project that addresses barriers to schooling might incorporate some activities related to health and child protection. However, the primary focus of the project remains education. What set P4G apart was its uniquely integrated model, which addressed girls’ well-being in a more holistic manner.

The project spanned four critical sectors for adolescent girls: sexual and reproductive health and rights, protection, education and economic empowerment. These areas were identified during the project-design phase based on consultations with girls, communities, local organizations and government officials. However, specific interventions were not predetermined. Instead, once underway, the project worked with girls to co-design activities, ensuring their needs and priorities were fully reflected. As sexual and reproductive



A problem tree created by girl leaders during a prioritization workshop in Benin.

health and rights emerged as a priority for girls in both countries, it took precedence, while components of education, protection and economic empowerment were also integrated, recognizing their interconnectedness. This flexible approach was supported by a grant agreement with Global Affairs Canada, which allowed room for piloting new ideas.

Rather than starting with a detailed implementation plan, P4G began with an inception plan to guide the first 17 months (November 1, 2018 – March 31, 2020), laying the groundwork for the project to evolve in partnership with stakeholders. This process led to the creation of the *Plan for Girls*, a living document that reflected the perspectives of girls in each country. While it was not feasible for every request to be directly addressed, the priorities articulated by girls shaped the broader project framework.

Building the *Plan for Girls*

The *Plan for Girls* was developed through a multi-step process in each country, with adolescent girls and young women in participating communes playing a central role in prioritizing their needs and aspirations.

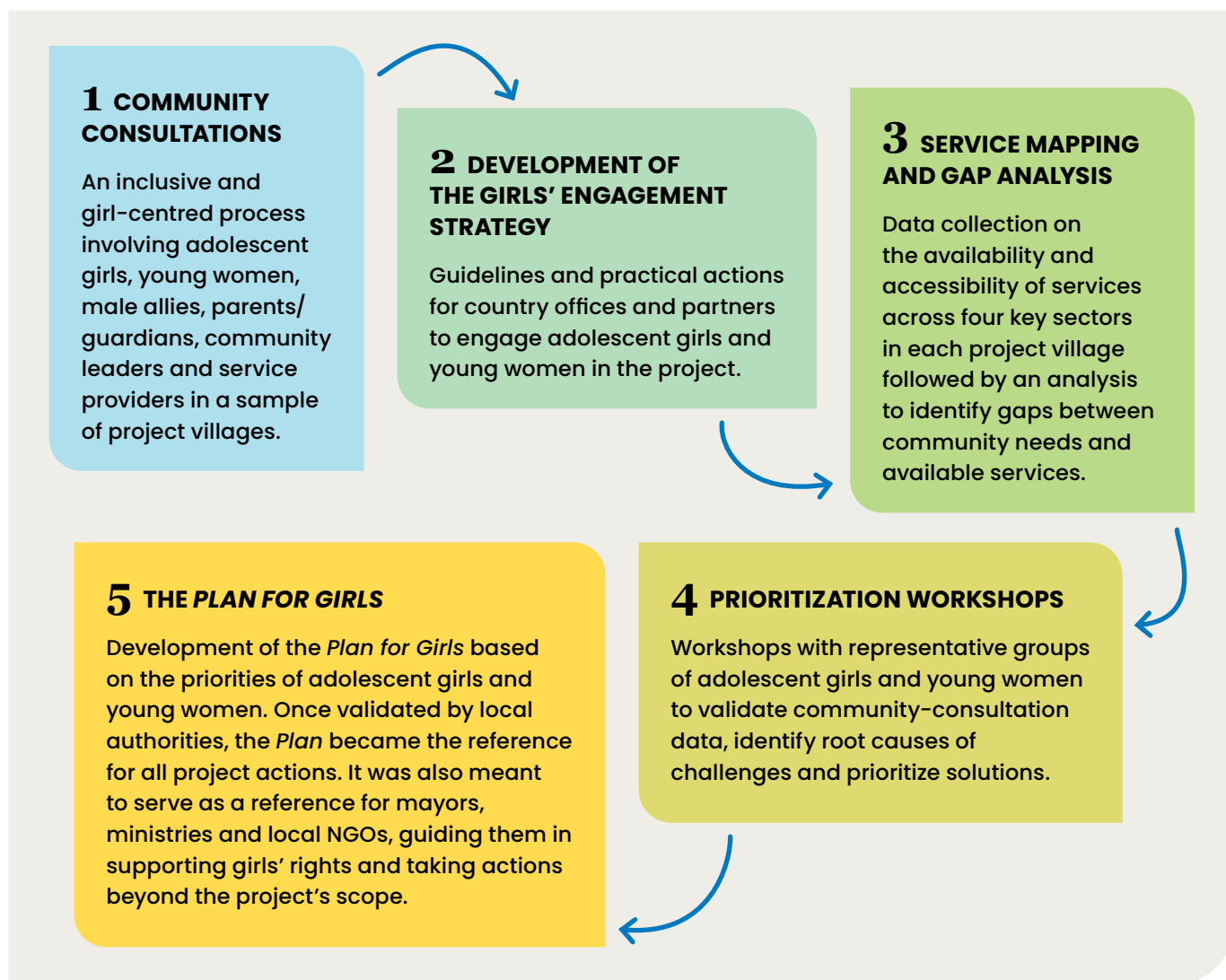


FIGURE 1. A multi-step process to develop the *Plan for Girls*

“

“Discouragement, lack of self-confidence and despair are behind us. We want to contribute where decisions are made. We want to be heard and understood. We want our recommendations to be implemented.”

–HAPSATOU, 17, & BLANDINE, 22, CAMEROON, *PLAN FOR GIRLS* DOCUMENT

The P4G project model: Key interventions

P4G's integrated approach was designed to support adolescent girls and young women from multiple angles. The project model below highlights the wide array of resources and opportunities available to girls at both the village and commune levels. While not all program components were

available at every project site, girls were often able to engage in a combination of activities tailored to their needs.



Click on each sector to explore the support provided by the project.

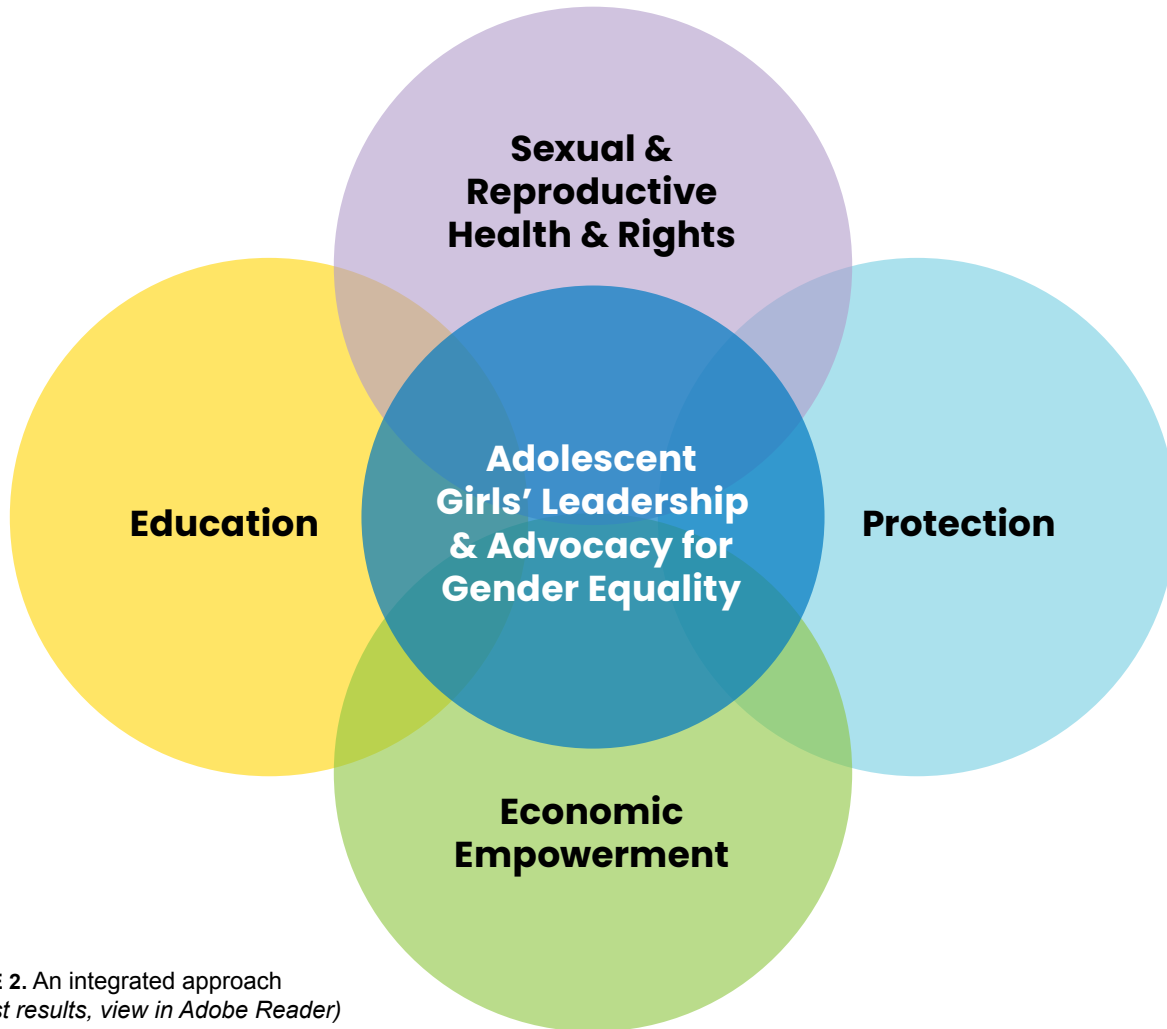


FIGURE 2. An integrated approach
(for best results, view in Adobe Reader)

“

“P4G responds to the interwoven issues that can prevent a girl from fulfilling her dreams. No single sector has the solution to her problems. We must put our hands together, each one committed to playing their role.”

—**EDITH TAMBE**, P4G PROJECT MANAGER, CAMEROON

Insights

Achievements

IN-DEPTH COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS

Since P4G was conceived as a girl-led initiative, the community-consultation process went well beyond conventional approaches. In the project's second year, over 3,900 stakeholders participated in discussions, contributing to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the issues faced by adolescent girls and young women. In Cameroon, more than 2,200 community members took part, including 1,107 girls and young women. In Benin, 1,714 participants were involved, with 863 of them being girls.

A variety of methods were used to gather input, including key informant interviews, case studies, focus-group discussions and participatory rural-appraisal tools such as body mapping, community-resource mapping and visionary journey exercises. Along with prioritizing the voices of girls, this approach engaged boys, parents, community leaders and service providers in sexual and reproductive health and rights, protection, education and economic empowerment. Participants came from a broad range of educational backgrounds, occupations, ethnic groups and socio-economic statuses. Facilitators promoted the meaningful participation of vulnerable girls and young people, including those with disabilities (and their caregivers) as well as girls who were pregnant, had children or were married or in a union.



Girls take part in a prioritization workshop, identifying key issues and determining their most pressing needs.

Notable outcomes:

- **Development of girls' advocacy skills:** Girls were encouraged to share their views and experiences during the consultations. Many outspoken participants went on to assume prominent leadership roles within the project.
- **Project design shaped by girls' perspectives:** Girls' input directly influenced the project's framework, ensuring it addressed their specific needs and aspirations.
- **Creation of a support network:** The consultations helped establish a network of allies committed to challenging harmful social and gender norms in their communities.
- **Increased community engagement:** Local communities became more involved and invested in supporting the project, ensuring greater buy-in and sustainability.

“

“One of the intentions of the consultations was to ignite a movement for girls' rights. We wanted to consult the girls but also identify future leaders and create a sense of urgency to join the project and fight for girls' rights. And the consultations did that.”

—**SANDRINE BATONGA**, HEALTH ADVISOR,
PLAN INTERNATIONAL CANADA

PARTICIPATORY MONITORING AND EVALUATION

A unique feature of the project was the **Young Citizen Score Card (YCSC)** methodology. Introduced in the project's fourth and fifth years, this community-driven approach brought together girls, boys, parents, service providers, decision makers and other community members to define their most pressing issues, resulting in community-specific monitoring and evaluation indicators. Using simple yet effective tools, participants evaluated issues, identified key duty bearers and developed advocacy plans. Where traditional score card methods are often led by experts, the YCSC methodology actively engaged adolescent girls, aiming to strengthen their advocacy skills and reinforce the demand for accountability from community leaders. (Learn more about the YCSC methodology in [this case study](#).)

“

“I’ve been involved in the Plan for Girls project for five years. What gave me the courage to keep going is that you gain so much from it, and you have the support of your parents.

The project inspires positive thinking. As a girl, you grow up feeling valued. You won’t go down the wrong path; you’ll grow up well.”

—SYLVIE, 18, NGONG, CAMEROON

Challenges and lessons learned

BALANCING GIRL-LED AND GIRL-CENTRED PROGRAMMING

The project initially aimed to adopt a girl-led approach, but during the start-up phase, questions arose about how to make this approach both effective and meaningful without overburdening adolescent girls. In collaboration with the [Proteknôn Foundation for Innovation and Learning](#), the team developed a Girls’ Engagement Strategy, which clarified the distinction between “girl-led” and “girl-centred” approaches. This sparked further exploration into what it truly meant for the initiative to be “girl-led.” Could girls take the lead in every aspect of the project? Was it realistic to expect them to do so? For example, many aspects of the project’s monitoring and evaluation would likely be beyond the girls’ capacity due to their age and lack of expertise.

Through in-depth discussions, the project team reached a consensus: Some parts of the project would be led by girls, and others would be girl-centred. Although the girls would not have full decision-making power at every stage of the project, they would be far more actively involved than in previous initiatives. They wouldn’t just be consulted but would meaningfully influence the project’s direction.



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A young girl involved in the P4G project in Benin.

Exploring the Potential of a Girl-Led Approach

How girls' active participation can shape programs that better meet their needs

A primary goal of P4G was to test a girl-led approach to program design and implementation, where girls and young women would have the agency and authority to make decisions that affect their lives. Based on the belief that girls are the best experts on their own realities, the girl-led approach explored how their active participation in the program cycle could drive initiatives that effectively meet their needs. This fact sheet will examine key aspects of the girl-led approach, including the Girls' Engagement Strategy, early successes and the challenges and lessons that emerged.

The Girls' Engagement Strategy

Plan International partnered with the Proteknôn Foundation for Innovation and Learning to develop the Girls' Engagement Strategy.¹ The document highlighted the key differences between the commonly used **girl-centred approach** and the **girl-led approach** envisioned by the project, offering practical steps to transition from one to the other.

¹ The Girls' Engagement Strategy aligned with Plan International's gender-transformative approach, which aims to address the root causes of gender inequality and exclusion by challenging unequal gender and power relations.



Girl-centred approach

Programming is implemented with and for girls but is led by adults. Adults support girls in taking active roles and shaping priorities, ensuring their interests and voices are central.



Girl-led approach

Girls make key decisions related to their group, setting priorities and designing plans independently. They may involve adults as needed for support and guidance.

FIGURE 1. Girl-centred vs. girl-led approach



A youth leader addresses the crowd at a community event. P4G's leadership training for girls emphasized public speaking as an essential advocacy skill.

P4G was designed to give girls real decision-making power within the project, but it was also important to avoid overburdening them given their school, work and household responsibilities as well as their limited experience in certain technical areas.

Teams in Cameroon, Benin and Canada reviewed the Girls' Engagement Strategy and worked together to identify which aspects of the project would be girl-led and which would remain girl-centred. For tasks outside the girls' expertise – such as project management, monitoring and evaluation, and grant compliance – the project team took the lead, ensuring that these activities were girl-centred. At the same time, the project created opportunities for girls to meaningfully influence the initiative, such as participating in annual work-planning meetings, advisory committees and data-validation activities like prioritizing health facility needs.

Raising their voices

How Girls Advisory Committees actively steered the project

A cornerstone of the girl-led approach was the creation of a Girls Advisory Committee and a Girls and Allies Advisory Committee in each commune involved in the project. Every village elected one to two girls to join the commune-level committee to represent their peers and help shape the P4G project.

BENIN:

- **Girls Advisory Committee:**
75 girls from 4 communes
- **Girls and Allies Advisory Committee:**
100 members (75 girls + 25 allies)

CAMEROON:

- **Girls Advisory Committee:**
66 girls from 2 communes
- **Girls and Allies Advisory Committee:**
81 members (66 girls + 15 allies)

The **Girls Advisory Committee** was a girls-only space, made up of girls and young women aged 13 to 23 from a variety of backgrounds: in school and out of school, employed and unemployed, young mothers, young married women and apprentices. Special efforts were made to include those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The **Girls and Allies Advisory Committee**, in contrast, also included boys, young men and adult allies: mothers, fathers, caregivers, teachers, community or religious leaders and local officials. All members were chosen by the girls, who selected individuals they trusted to support their efforts.

The goals of the committees were to:

- Provide a platform for girls to take a leading role in designing, planning and implementing the P4G project.
- Build the capacity of girls to lead the project and advocate for their rights.
- Rally support from key allies in the community to advance the project's goals.
- Facilitate dialogue between girls and duty bearers (at local, regional and national levels) to influence policies and government services.

Committee members convened at the commune level and participated in leadership and advocacy training on girls' rights. They created action plans to lead activities in their villages, such as awareness campaigns, educational talks, peer discussions and advocacy. The committees met regularly to assess progress, plan future activities and share experiences.

To learn what it was like for girls to contribute and be heard through Girls Advisory Committees, see [this case study](#).

“

“I’m very happy to be part of this group. Despite being the only person living with a disability, I’m proud to be with my peers and be accepted despite my situation. Through my presence on the Girls Advisory Committee, I want to represent girls living with disabilities so their needs are considered.”

—HÉLÈNE, 19, GLAZOUÉ, BENIN



Jacqueline leads an awareness session for youth in her village.

Unpacking the Girls' Engagement Strategy

The Girls' Engagement Strategy involved five essential components:

- 1. Plan and reflect with girls**
- 2. Create safe and inclusive spaces**
- 3. Collaborate with allies, men and boys**
- 4. Build girls' capacity to assert their rights**
- 5. Strengthen platforms for dialogue between girls and duty bearers**

Below, we outline how P4G implemented each component of the Girls' Engagement Strategy:

1. Plan and reflect with girls

P4G began with robust participatory consultations to ensure that girls' voices defined the initiative. At the project's design stage, initial consultations engaged 98 adolescent girls across both countries to identify their most pressing needs and priorities. In P4G's second year, the consultation process was far more extensive, engaging 1,107 girls in Cameroon and 863 in Benin to develop a deeper understanding of their experiences. Every village involved in the project (60 in each country) elected girl representatives to participate in "prioritization workshops," in which they identified common challenges and proposed tangible solutions. Their work was recorded in each country's *Plan for Girls*, a foundational document that guided all project activities. (For details on the development of the *Plan for Girls*, refer to the [fact sheet on P4G's innovative approach](#).)

2. Create safe and inclusive spaces

During the consultation process, girls prioritized creating safe spaces where they could hold group meetings and express themselves without fear of judgment or discrimination. These spaces – chosen by the girls for their comfort, accessibility and security – were established at the village and commune level, providing girls with a place to



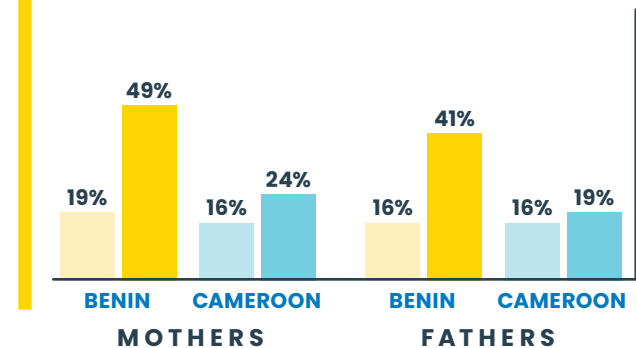
A meeting of the Girls Advisory Committee for the commune of Bantè, Benin, 2023.

speak freely, plan advocacy activities and engage in livelihood training. Protection services were also integrated into the safe spaces built by the project in each commune's headquarter town. (To learn how safe spaces in Benin supported girls' growth and development, see [this case study](#).)

3. Collaborate with allies, boys and men

For a girl-led initiative to succeed, involving both supportive and resistant community stakeholders is essential. Working with allies and positively engaging opponents helped create a protective social environment for girls and build support for the project. P4G mobilized boys and young men as brothers, peers and current and future husbands to challenge harmful social norms and support girls' agency.

The percentage of parents who perceived girls and boys as equal increased in interventions areas, both among mothers (from 19% to 49% in Benin and from 16% to 24% in Cameroon) and fathers (16% to 41% in Benin and 16% to 19% in Cameroon).



4. Build girls' capacity to assert their rights

A key strategy was organizing adolescent girls and young women into groups for life-skills and leadership training while also expanding their social-support networks. The project strengthened existing groups, such as youth savings and loan associations, agricultural and animal-husbandry groups and school governments. It also created Champions of Change² clubs for both girls and boys, each with tailored programming adapted to the local context. For girls, the curriculum focused on self-esteem and rights awareness; for boys, it emphasized allyship in advancing gender equality.

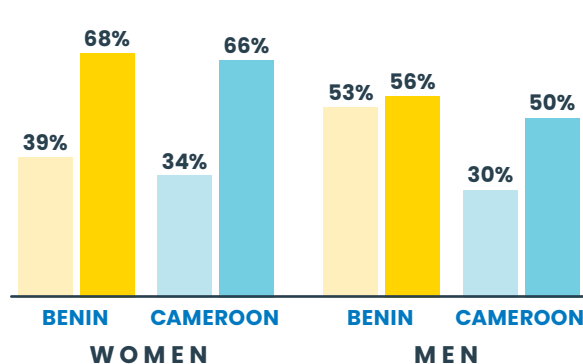
Members of the Girls Advisory Committee, who were elected by peers in their villages, met regularly at the commune level to discuss current issues and priorities and develop their leadership, facilitation and advocacy skills. They received training on gender equality, protection, family planning, civic engagement and participatory governance and then created action plans for sharing information through peer-to-peer trainings and community awareness campaigns.

5. Strengthen platforms for dialogue between girls and duty bearers

The project created opportunities for girls and young women to engage with government officials, service providers and traditional leaders so they could voice their views and influence decisions. Members of the Girls Advisory Committees participated in local, regional and national P4G steering committees alongside ministry officials. Youth leaders also participated in mayors' meetings to advocate for continued commitment to the *Plan for Girls* through specific budget allocations. Girls involved in the Young Citizen Score Card initiative, implemented in 12 villages in each country, had the chance to lead evaluations of education, health and child-protection public services and advocate for change with local leaders. The project also sensitized duty bearers regarding the importance

of gender equality and the laws and policies supporting adolescent girls' participation.

The percentage of leaders and community influencers who perceived girls and boys as equals increased in projects areas in both Cameroon (from **34% to 66%** among women and from **30% to 50%** among men) and Benin (from **39% to 68%** among women and from **53% to 56%** among men).



“

“If you talk to girls who participated in P4G and compare them to girls from the same area involved in other projects, like those for sponsored children, the contrast is striking. The ripple effect of P4G is powerful. Many of these girls are now creating their own groups to share what they’ve learned and advocate for the well-being of children and girls.”

—**EDITH TAMBE**, P4G PROJECT MANAGER, CAMEROON

² The Champions of Change approach, developed by Plan International, engages adolescent girls and boys in transformative change around gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights and the impact of gender norms and power relations. Facilitators guide participants through separate curricula for girls and boys, providing them with information, training and reflection opportunities. The approach also creates joint safe spaces for dialogue and collaborative action.

Insights

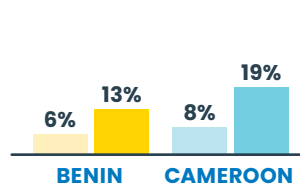
Achievements

FOSTERING SELF-CONFIDENCE IN GIRLS

P4G focused on supporting girls' agency, leadership and public-speaking skills through various programs, including Girls Advisory Committees, Champions of Change clubs, youth leadership camps (in Cameroon) and the Young Citizen Score Card initiative. These efforts aimed to help girls build self-confidence so they could articulate their needs, report harm and assert their rights.

Hapsato, from Bénoué, Cameroon, was 18 when she participated in the project's prioritization workshops, in which girls worked together to determine the direction of the initiative. She says the experience had a significant impact: "Before I took part in the prioritization workshop and the advocacy training session, I wasn't able to convince people about the issues affecting girls and I didn't have any arguments to back up my ideas. What's more, I didn't know what approach to take to avoid going against tradition. Now I have solid arguments to defend the cause of girls, and I'm more confident than ever."

The percentage of adolescent girls and young women who indicated that they can provide their views and are listened to in their community more than doubled in project areas, from **6% to 13%** in Benin, and **from 8% to 19%** in Cameroon, while in comparison areas the results dropped or saw no change.



GIRL-LED ADVOCACY INITIATIVES

Girls involved in the project have applied their newfound advocacy skills to drive meaningful change in their communities. A notable example comes

from Cameroon, where in 2022, 79 young leaders participated in P4G's public-speaking and advocacy training, with 10 advancing to specialized skill development. Through group work, they identified community issues and developed proposals for new initiatives, including improving adolescent-friendly health services, creating a public mural to raise awareness of gender-based violence and establishing safe spaces in health centres for survivors of violence. The youth presented their proposals to the mayors and town councils of Ngong and Lagdo, who committed 4,000,000 FCFA and 2,000,000 FCFA³, respectively, to fund their initiatives.

Throughout the project, **over 90 advocacy and public engagement activities** were conducted by project-supported youth networks in Cameroon and Benin.

MOBILIZING COMMUNITY ALLIES TO SUPPORT GIRL LEADERSHIP

Formal allies assisted girls in engaging with local duty bearers and lent support to their advocacy efforts. In Benin, adult members of the Girls and Allies Advisory Committee helped girls meet with the kings of Savalou and Bantè as well as local chiefs to secure access to arable land and resources. In Cameroon, county mayors – serving as mid-level government partners of the project – facilitated access to their local councillors. This was an important step in securing county budget allocations for youth-led activities. Individual allies, such as mentors, supported girls' self-advocacy and worked to remove barriers to their leadership. In one instance, mentorship by a respected midwife helped a Girls Advisory Committee member avoid a forced marriage, allowing her to continue in her leadership role and pursue her ambition to become a midwife herself.

3 The Canadian equivalents of 4,000,000 FCFA and 2,000,000 FCFA are approximately CAD 9,610 and CAD 4,805, respectively.

Challenges and lessons learned

DEEPENING GIRL-LED PARTICIPATION

The project aimed to balance girls' time constraints and limited expertise in certain technical areas with their interest in shaping the project. Teams identified key activities and decision points where girls could contribute their input. Future girl-led programming could explore opportunities to deepen co-creation and co-implementation with girls for more meaningful involvement. For example, the engagement of adolescent girls and young women in the Young Citizen Score Card methodology demonstrated that they have the interest and capacity to be more meaningfully engaged in project monitoring, provided that indicators and tools are simplified and created collaboratively.

ENSURING CONTINUITY IN GIRL LEADERSHIP

Project managers in Benin and Cameroon noted that high turnover within Girls Advisory Committees, Champions of Change clubs and other youth-led groups was a challenge. Girls left their groups for a variety of reasons, such as household responsibilities, pursuing further education or training, marriage or relocating with their families. Working with young people in a period of transition made it difficult to maintain group cohesion at times. Succession planning between older and younger girls can help ensure leadership continuity. Actively involving all members in leadership roles and recruiting new members as needed can also strengthen and sustain group vitality.

STRENGTHENING YOUTH GOVERNANCE AT THE VILLAGE LEVEL

While the project successfully established Girls Advisory Committees at the commune level – with each village electing a representative to voice the perspectives of local girls – some project staff have suggested expanding this structure to the village level. Creating youth governance committees within villages would help harmonize strategies, further support the leadership of adolescent girls and young women and provide a direct platform for engaging with local authorities and driving change in their communities.

FINANCING GIRLS' PROJECTS FOR GREATER SUSTAINABILITY

Project staff have noted that the Girls' Engagement Strategy could be more sustainable if resources beyond skill-building and socialization were provided to support girls' own projects, helping them turn their ideas into action. This process should involve encouraging girls and their allies to design both short-term and long-term projects, develop action plans and create strategies for funding their implementation. The project itself should establish a dedicated support line for financing girls' microprojects.



Girl leaders involved in the P4G project continue to champion their rights and well-being.

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A young girl speaks at the inauguration of a newly built safe space in the commune of Dassa-Zoumé, Benin, 2023.

An Integrated Approach to Advancing Girls' Rights

Driving sustainable change through a comprehensive and collaborative strategy

The P4G project adopted a uniquely integrated approach to address the complex barriers to girls' empowerment in rural communities in Benin and Cameroon. Not only was this approach multi-sectoral – spanning sexual and reproductive health and rights, protection against violence, education and economic empowerment programming – but it also employed a multi-stakeholder strategy, bringing together diverse actors to co-create solutions that would be owned by girls and their communities.

This fact sheet will highlight the key features of P4G's integrated model. It will also examine successes, challenges and lessons learned, offering recommendations to guide future programming.

Key features

A multi-stakeholder partnership strategy

At the heart of the P4G project was partnership building, which is essential for driving lasting change and ensuring alignment with both national policies and local initiatives. The project formed key partnerships with sectoral ministries,¹ local NGOs and municipal governments, uniting diverse stakeholders to foster collaboration among government bodies, communities and girls.

¹ Government ministries involved in the project included those focused on women and family, health and social affairs, education, youth, vocational training, employment, agriculture and rural development, small and medium enterprises and local development.

In each country, P4G established a national steering committee chaired by a lead agency (the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Family in Cameroon and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Microfinance in Benin), with the Canadian High Commission serving as co-chair. Regional steering committees, led by delegates from the lead ministry, further reinforced accountability and leveraged existing partnerships.

At the commune level, P4G created Project Implementation Committees, each chaired by the local mayor. These committees facilitated collaboration between the local council, ministry representatives and members of the project's Girls Advisory Committees, which were composed of girls elected by peers in their communities.

One of the most effective outcomes of the multi-stakeholder approach was the creation of “safe spaces.” Established at village and commune levels, these spaces provided girls with secure areas for meetings and counselling, eventually evolving into multi-purpose hubs as girls became more active. In Benin, P4G facilitated co-management agreements for commune-level safe spaces, as part of the project's transition plans. These agreements defined roles and power sharing between Girls Advisory Committees, mayors, chief medical officers and heads of social services, with regional oversight from health and social services directors. The spaces will now have joint ownership, reflecting the collaborative process that led to their creation. For more information on the safe spaces established through the project, see [below](#).



The commune-level safe space built in Bantè, Benin, is equipped with resources for income-generating initiatives and vital information on girls' rights.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR GIRLS

At the village level, P4G developed a network of local allies to champion girls' rights. This included individuals who took on formal roles with the project, such as community mentors or adult members of the Girls and Allies Advisory Committee,² as well as others who were trained to better address girls' needs on a daily basis, such as teachers, parents and health workers. The goal was to create a supportive environment for girls and generate broad community backing for the project's objectives.

This approach helped expand girls' trusted relationships, providing them with people to turn to for support on sensitive issues like sexual and reproductive health, teenage pregnancy and sexual and gender-based violence, which emerged as top concerns during consultations.

² The Girls and Allies Advisory Committee, in contrast to the Girls Advisory Committee, also included boys, young men, and adult allies. For additional details, please refer to the factsheet on P4G's [girl-led approach](#).

In Cameroon, for example, all 60 project villages established Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Committees made up of parents, traditional leaders and young people who collaborated to raise awareness, intervene in cases and support survivors.

In the sixth year of the project, these committees partnered with village-level parents' clubs to lead sensitization sessions on topics such as girls' education, parental responsibility, early marriage and sexual assault, reaching **7,684 people in the commune of Lagdo and 4,920 people in Ngong.**

In both countries, girls mobilized their support networks to prevent forced marriages and ensure that they were able to stay in school. Their allies listened, supported their autonomy and advocated on their behalf with parents or community leaders. (For a detailed example from Cameroon, see [this case study](#).)

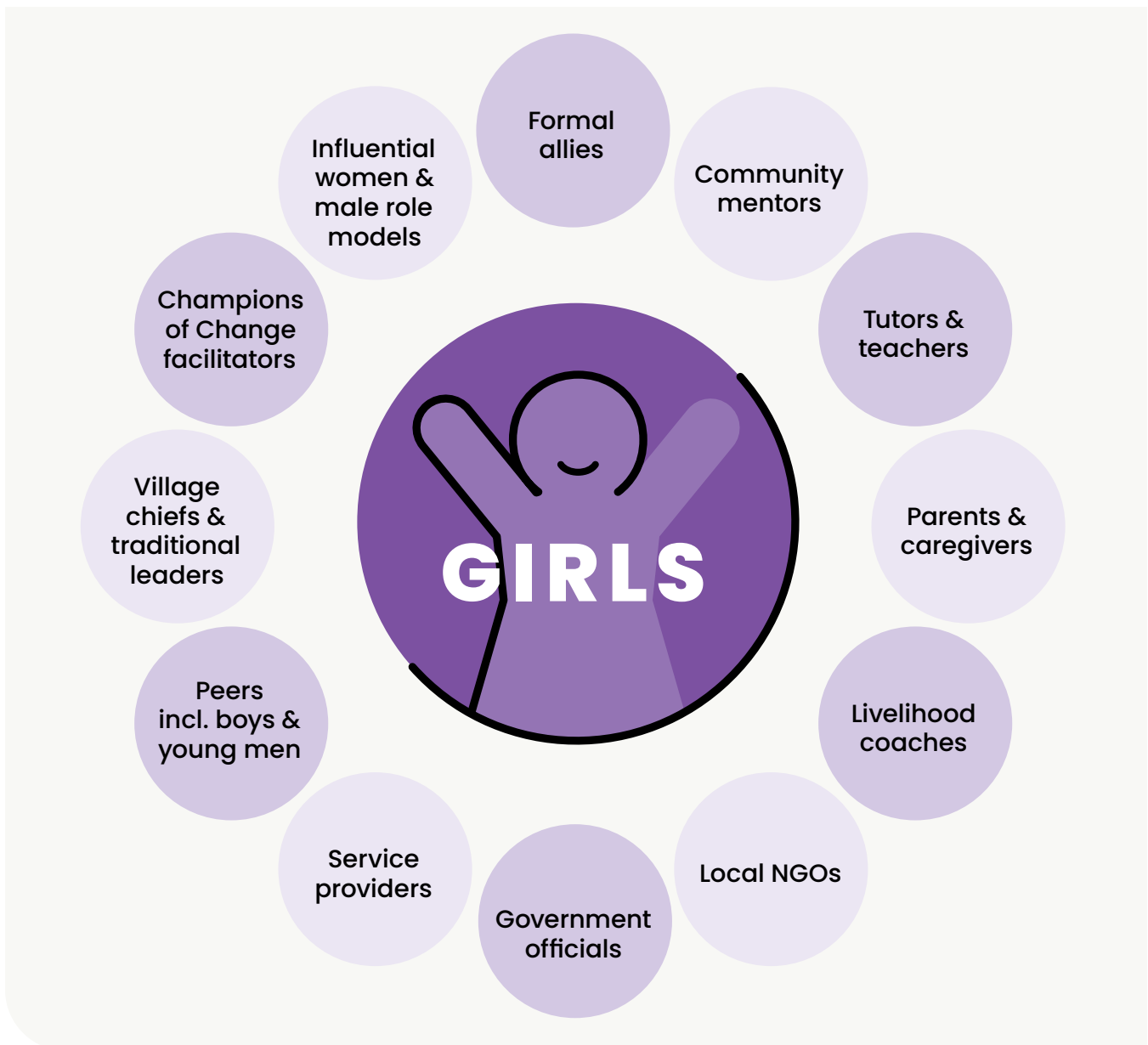


FIGURE 1. Community stakeholders forming a support network for girls

An integrated approach

P4G integrated four sectors to promote collaboration over isolated efforts, creating safe and supportive environments for girls to assert their rights. The following section highlights examples of how the project brought services from multiple sectors together in one setting, offering girls comprehensive support in addressing the complex challenges they face.

SAFE SPACES

The safe spaces created by P4G initially served as places for girls to meet and speak freely with one another. Over time, these spaces evolved into hubs that also addressed other needs, including income-generation, skill development and support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. The following examples show how the spaces offered integrated, comprehensive support for girls and young women.

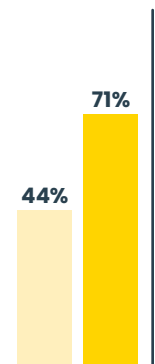
- **Psychosocial support and case management:** Psychosocial workers present at the safe spaces in both countries offered support to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, providing case management and referrals in response to urgent health and safety needs. They addressed the economic factors contributing to girls' vulnerability to gender-based violence by connecting them to life-skills- and resilience-building activities and, in Benin, referring them to income-generation specialists.



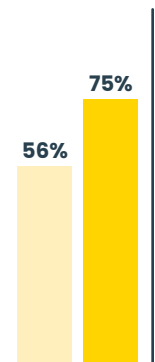
Girls in Benin take part in a training program, learning to create accessories to generate income.

- **Leadership development:** Girls Advisory Committee members, alongside young women and girls from the community, have used safe spaces to lead a range of activities. This includes holding meetings, conducting training and awareness-raising sessions and working on income-generating projects.
- **Vocational skills:** At village-level safe spaces, community mentors provided training in skills such as sewing, embroidery and soap making. In Cameroon, several mentors generously offered their personal supplies and equipment to enhance the girls' learning experience and help them earn their own income.
- **Raising awareness on rights and protection:** Mentors facilitated awareness-raising sessions for young people on vital topics such as abuse, bullying, sexual violence, child health, personal hygiene and early and forced marriage. They also provided support services, including group listening sessions and referrals to appropriate services for survivors.

In **CAMEROON**, the percentage of girls and young women in project areas who know what to do in case of a protection incident **rose from 44% at baseline to 71% at end of project**, over 5 times the increase seen in comparison communities.



In **BENIN**, the percentage of adolescent girls and young women who perceive that they could access protection services if needed **rose from 56% at baseline to 75% at end of project** in intervention areas (compared to an improvement of less than 1% in comparison areas).



EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

P4G implemented a range of activities across formal and non-formal educational settings to address challenges in multiple sectors. Key examples of this approach are outlined below:

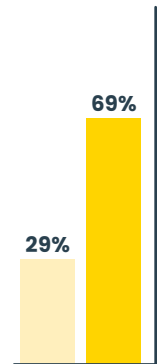
- **Tutoring for improved educational outcomes:** In Benin, the project set up a girl-to-girl tutoring program in 22 secondary schools to help girls and young women navigate educational challenges and stay focused on their academic goals. The program also provided the tutors and tutees with textbooks and solar lamps to support their studies at home. Participating schools have pledged to continue the program in the 2025–2026 school year, working with a new group of girls.
- **School clubs for income generation and awareness-raising:** In Cameroon, youth from 40 school clubs created by the project raised awareness on topics such as gender-based violence and the importance of girls in STEM through peer-to-peer discussions and radio talk shows. In Benin, 40 school cooperatives were created and were provided training and support to help girls launch income-generating activities, such as producing and selling snacks.
- **Educational talks in schools and non-formal learning environments:** In Benin, the project organized educational talks on sexual and reproductive health and rights in both primary and secondary schools as well as in non-formal learning settings. Teachers



P4G trained teachers in Benin to lead educational talks on sexual and reproductive health and rights, along with other crucial topics related to girls' rights.

in schools and vocational professionals, such as small business owners and technical and vocational education instructors, were trained to facilitate discussions on these topics with students and apprentices respectively. In Cameroon, health care workers and public health officers provided training to students in school health clubs, covering sexual and reproductive health topics such as menstrual hygiene, sexually transmitted infections and early-pregnancy prevention.

In **CAMEROON**, the level to which targeted health facilities could be considered gender responsive and adolescent friendly **increased from 29% in year 4 of the project to 69% at the end of the project**. Improvements were seen in the percentage of facilities with consultation rooms for adolescents that ensure privacy and confidentiality, with providers who explain procedures and referrals to adolescents and seek their informed consent, and with a staff member specifically tasked to focus on adolescents.



Insights Achievements

INSTITUTIONALIZING THE *PLAN FOR GIRLS*

To encourage government ownership of the *Plan for Girls*, the project advocated for the integration of girls' priorities into government planning and budgeting processes. Government officials and staff were trained on relevant laws, policies and support mechanisms related to adolescent girls' rights and participation, with a focus on ensuring that girls' voices were represented in strategic plans.

In both countries, the project set a target for each participating commune to include a specific number of actions addressing the priority needs of adolescent girls and young women in their communal, sectoral and operational plans. All communes in both countries not only met, but exceeded their target. Their plans included the construction of classrooms, boreholes and latrines as well as subsidies for sports associations and improvements in infrastructure such as road rehabilitation and rural electricity extension.

- In Cameroon, these efforts resulted in the mobilization of over 450 million FCFA (approximately CAD 1 million) in funding.
- In Benin, girl leaders actively participated in the development of municipal five-year strategic plans, ensuring that the voices and priorities of girls were included in long-term planning.

“

“The life of the *Plan for Girls* will not end with the project; it is not a project plan. It is a plan developed by girls from these communities, and it was endorsed by their mayors and local authorities.”

—SANDRINE BATONGA, HEALTH ADVISOR,
PLAN INTERNATIONAL CANADA



Inauguration of the newly built safe space in the commune of Dassa-Zoumé, Benin, 2023.

SUSTAINING CHANGE

To ensure lasting impact after project completion, it is essential to build local ownership, capacity and resources to respond to the evolving needs of girls. In its fifth year, the project established structures to support this continued effort.

- In Benin, a **Communal Coordination Platform** was set up in each of the four communes to oversee the ongoing implementation of the *Plan for Girls* and manage project infrastructure. Chaired by municipal authorities, these platforms actively engage representatives from the Girls Advisory Committees. Each platform is supported by a dedicated budget line within the annual work plan of the respective town hall.
- In Cameroon, a **Resource Mobilization Committee** was created to secure resources for advancing the priorities of adolescent girls and young women. The committee, which includes youth, local authorities and traditional leaders, works to assess development needs, devise resource mobilization strategies and prepare funding proposals. Additionally, a Transition Committee was formed to develop a transition strategy focused on building capacity, financing local partners and monitoring progress.

Challenges and lessons learned

ALIGNING PROJECT DESIGN WITH GIRLS' PRIORITIES

P4G was designed to deliver interventions across four sectors, with the scope of each determined through consultations with girls. In retrospect, several adjustments could have been made to better align the project's efforts and budget with the priorities girls identified. During the project design phase, the activities outlined for each sector largely followed conventional sector-specific approaches. However, these could have been streamlined, given that the consultation process was meant to shape sector priorities. Moving forward, projects should include a dedicated stage for realigning the budget and staffing efforts to reflect the key priorities as

defined through consultations. It's important to distinguish between an integrated and a multi-sectoral approach. While a multi-sectoral approach may involve all sectors implementing their typical activities independently, an integrated approach uses all sectors collaboratively to reinforce shared thematic priorities.

WORKING EFFECTIVELY ACROSS MULTIPLE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

To ensure the success of future integrated projects, it is essential to invest significant time in project governance and relationship building, as these elements are foundational to long-term sustainability. Staff from both countries emphasized that effective communication and collaboration across multiple government agencies were crucial to the success of the project. Below are key lessons learned that can guide future initiatives:

- **Take a back seat:** It is critical for NGOs to position themselves in a supporting role, facilitating secretariat functions while enabling key government actors to lead multi-stakeholder committees. This approach is crucial to fostering ownership and sustainability, as it ensures that government stakeholders are invested from day one rather than simply taking over after project closure.
- **Create a chain of accountability:** Delays in project implementation often arise from government bodies seeking authorization from higher levels. A good practice involved empowering regional committee chairs from the lead ministry, ensuring their accountability upwards while simultaneously granting them the authority to hold lower levels of government accountable for executing activities effectively.

- **Build the capacity of local councils to support girls' leadership:** A key aspect of project governance was working with mayors and local councils to secure their buy-in. The project also focused on strengthening their capacity to support adolescent girls and young women as rights holders and active participants in local governance.



“When protocol is cumbersome, it prevents meaningful collaboration. To overcome this, we must build relationships at all levels – community, regional and national – and continually nurture them. It’s about more than just sharing information; it’s about creating a network of trust and accountability that drives progress.”

–EDITH TAMBE, P4G PROJECT MANAGER,
CAMEROON

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P4G participants in Benin.

Thank you!

We extend our sincere gratitude to **Global Affairs Canada** for your invaluable support of the Plan for Girls project in Benin and Cameroon. Thank you for your continued commitment to the education, health, safety, and well-being of girls and young women. Together, we are helping them gain the tools and opportunities they need to turn their plans into reality.

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