



# FOCUS 'N GE

Plan International Canada | March 8, 2019



## A MESSAGE FROM THE GENDER EQUALITY UNIT

Happy International Women's Day!

This 8th edition of **Focus 'n GE** continues on a series of themes that highlight how furthering our commitment to achieving gender **transformative** outcomes across our programming requires working at multiple levels and with multiple stakeholders.

In celebration of International Women's Day, this edition of the newsletter will explore the core of our gender transformative work: **empowerment of women and girls**. As you may recall from previous newsletters, key to our gender transformative work is to take a rights based approach and **improve not only the daily condition** of women and girls, but to **elevate their position and value within their families, communities, and society as a whole**. At the heart of this objective is bolstering the inherent, individual and collective agency of women and girls to take the lead and continue in creating transformative change - with us as enablers!

In our work to support the empowerment of women and girls, **Plan International partners with a wide variety of**

**INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY** (IWD) celebrated annually on March 8 celebrates the social, economic, cultural, civil and political achievements of women. The first IWD was celebrated in 1911.

*"The story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist nor to any one organization but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights."*

- Gloria Steinem

**Women's (and girls') Organizations (WOs)**. This newsletter will present the different ways Plan International programming partners with WOEs, as well as look at some of the learnings from our work in this area. We hope that this newsletter can also provide a critical take on how we fit into the global women's and girls' rights movement by supporting WOEs across the globe and learning from them.

We hope you enjoy this edition!

**The Gender Equality Unit**

## WHAT ARE WOEs ?

WOEs (Women's Organizations) are entities and groups committed to advocating for women and girls' rights, and leading change enabling women and girls to fully realize their rights. These can be broad agenda formal national or regional organizations, focused issue organizations, networks, service delivery organizations or they can be small grassroots, local community groups. Regardless of type or size common to all of them is the advancement of women and girls' rights.

Globally WOEs have been at the centre of the historical

and continuing fight for women's and girls' rights and are instrumental in the advances witnessed around the world. For any entity working on gender equality to be successful, it is crucial to work with WOEs as they are experts in their contexts, main engines of change, provide legitimacy to the agenda and have the reach and constituency that is necessary for strengthening the movement.

As an organization striving for gender equality and girls' rights, partnering with WOEs is critical for Plan International to achieve its objectives. We partner with many different types of WOEs. Critical to these partnerships is ensuring that we align with and support the missions of WOEs in the countries where we work, taking feminist approaches.



## WORKING WITH WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

Plan International works closely with several women's rights organizations that specifically focus on addressing the rights and needs of unique populations, such as sex workers or LGBTQI populations with the aim of **strengthening the capacity of these organizations to continue to achieve their mandates outside of Plan International supported programs or projects.**

## SEX WORKERS' ASSOCIATION IN EL SALVADOR

El Salvador is **one of the most dangerous countries** to be a woman due to **high rates of gender-based violence and femicides**. Female sex workers are particularly exposed to violence and rights abuses on a daily basis, not only from pimps, **but also from clients and gangs that operate in the country**. And from police and local **authorities**. Stigma and discrimination from patriarchal and conservative governmental institutions and society prevent sex workers from seeking justice. **The existing normative framework in El Salvador is insufficient to ensure the realization of sex workers' fundamental rights, including the rights to life, integrity, equality, and prompt justice\***.

In addition, sex workers have little opportunity to access essential services, particularly in the health sector. **A study** conducted in 2014 showed that 1 out of 3 female sex workers surveyed in San Salvador perceived hostility on the part of the health services administrative officers; **1 out of 5** respondents were denied the health care they needed; and **1 out of 2** said they had sometimes suffered discrimination. This leaves vulnerable a group whose HIV prevalence of 3.7%\*\* is **6 times higher** than the one of the general population in the country.

This context of normalized and institutionalized violations of female sex workers' rights makes the work of women's organizations in general, and sex workers' organizations in particular, **very difficult in El Salvador**. That is why Plan International is supporting the movement of female sex

workers Orquídeas del Mar through the Global Fund project "Innovating services, reducing risks and renewing lives in El Salvador" initiated in 2014. **This community-based women's organization established in October 2005 aims to promote the respect of sex workers' human rights and transform the conditions in which sex work is carried out in the country.** To this end, Orquídeas del Mar conducts studies to document violence and human rights violations suffered by sex workers; advocates for the protection of women's and sex workers' rights and the recognition of sex work; and works with female sex workers on the prevention of STIs and HIV. This organization has been involved in actions aimed at the elaboration and approval of the Equality Law as well as the Special Integral Law for a Life Free of Violence for Women.

Plan International supported an integral organizational strengthening of Orquídeas del Mar to support it to achieve its goals and increase its sustainability. **The organization has been supported in creating strategies for financial self-sustainability as well as improving the quality of its management and the services that it provides.** This helped the organization in establishing a consolidated, functional and sustainable structure and increased its ability to generate its own resources to continue its efforts in the national response to HIV/AIDS and its advocacy for the rights of female sex workers. In addition, Plan International provided technical support for the elaboration and modification of policies and legal regulations on issues related to the Sex Work Bill.

María Consuelo Raymundo, the president of Orquídeas del Mar, underlines the value of Plan International's core assistance to her organization: **"If it was not for the permanent support of Plan International in technical, legal and financial processes, the organization would not have the weight and recognition that it currently has with State institutions, non-governmental organizations and the civil society in general. (...) Thanks to Plan International, there is now a strong administrative structure, with manuals, processes, and regulations that are highly necessary to do a good job and reach the target population that are female sex workers. With this support, it has been possible to approach and work with 10,000 sex workers to date, who have been empowered with their integral rights."**



\* Movimiento de Mujeres Orquídeas del Mar. Estudio Jurídico sobre situación de los derechos humanos de mujeres trabajadoras sexuales y análisis de contexto del marco jurídico internacional y nacional en El Salvador, 2016.

\*\* MEGAS/MINSAL/2017



## LGBTQ ASSOCIATION IN BENIN

According to UNAIDS, HIV prevention programs aimed at women remain underdeveloped. As a result, there were 900,000 new HIV infections among women over the age of 15 years in the world in 2015. Out of the 17.8 million women worldwide living with HIV, approximately 39,000 live in Benin. Among them are many women with diverse gender identities or sexual orientation. These women are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection and STIs due to the higher stigmatization, discrimination and gender-based violence that they face routinely.

In Benin, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) people face very unfavourable social attitudes, reinforced by the strong influence of religions, customs and morals that condemn homosexual practices. Even though there is no law in Benin that explicitly criminalizes people on the basis of their sexual orientation, the LGBTQ community and its supporters are often subjected to verbal and physical violence including: unsolved homicides of LGBTQ activists, "corrective rapes" of presumed or known lesbians, and attacks on the headquarters of associations working on the protection and promotion of LGBTQ people's rights.

Despite these obstacles, civil society organizations continue to collaborate with the leadership of LGBTQ populations and advocate for their rights. Plan International Benin supports a local organization AFRO-BENIN, an LGBTQ women's association under the umbrella LGBTQ network in Benin called COALITION SIDA-BENIN, through the project "Scale up for universal access to community-based HIV prevention, care and treatment in Benin".

AFRO-BENIN, established in July 2013, works to build a world where all women and girls, regardless of their identity or sexual orientation, are empowered. To this end, AFRO-BENIN conducts capacity building for self-determination; promotes the fundamental rights and free-

doms of all women and LGBTQ women by combating violence and all forms of discrimination; raises awareness around sexual and reproductive health; and fights against the feminization of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Plan International supports AFRO-BENIN with core institutional support that covers part of its management and operating costs including carrying out educational talks and group discussion activities on specific themes related to health and rights issues faced by its target groups. This assistance is of great importance to AFRO-BENIN as it further enables the organization to remain in contact with its constituency and to raise their awareness on their rights, HIV and STIs for behavior change. A peer educator from AFRO-BENIN sheds light on the collaboration: Plan International Benin *"helps us a lot to bring the girls together and let them know their HIV status and (...) increase their knowledge on several aspects of health, STIs and HIV as well as their rights. I ask that Plan's support continues on this path because it is a good initiative"*. Recent feedback from a beneficiary of the activities implemented by AFRO-BENIN underlines the positive impact on her and her eagerness to continue being involved: *"I really appreciate AFRO-BENIN's activities. It is thanks to them that I was able to know my HIV status (...) I participate in the activities and it is very helpful (...) We can have a better understanding and explanations on sexual orientation and our rights. I would really like to participate in these activities over and over again and learn more"*.



*"I stand with AFRO-BENIN for women's empowerment. DO YOU?"*

# WORKING WITH MASS-BASED AND TRADITIONAL WOMEN'S STRUCTURES

As recognized entities with a formal presence in countries and communities where Plan International works, these structures offer powerful levers of change. Plan International works with these organizations primarily to strengthen their existing capacities to support their advocacy work, enhance their service delivery initiatives and collectively

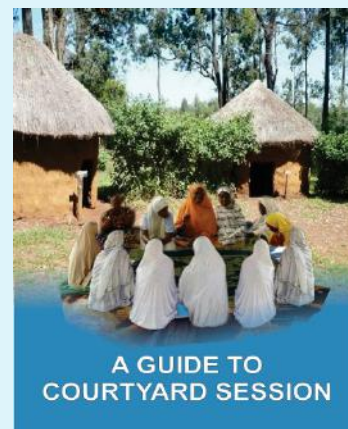
address any number of key issues affecting women and girls' rights. **Our projects and programs serve as entry points to build capacity, not just to achieve project or program outcomes, but to strengthen them to continue to fight for women and girls rights beyond the duration of any one project.**

## 100 WOMEN GROUPS IN NIGERIA— GRASSROOTS DRIVERS OF CHANGE

A 100 Women Group is a coalition building process that brings non-governmental organizations (NGOs) community-based organizations (CBOs), and faith-based organizations through networking to identify women's health and other rights and development issues within their communities and through participatory dialogue identify strategies to address them. As grassroots representatives, they engage with their Local Government Authorities to address issues. These groups are organic recognized entities with a formal remit and massive outreach in their communities. Two of Plan International's reproductive health and rights projects in Nigeria, BORN and SHOW funded by the government of Canada partner with these groups recognizing their powerful presence in communities to promote women's and adolescent girls' participation, decision making and rights in reproductive health in Bauchi and Sokoto states of Nigeria.

As a key activity, the SHOW and BORN projects have built the capacity of members of the 100 Women Groups in local communities on effective facilitation of courtyard sessions for women and adolescent girls.

Courtyard sessions are a community forum conducted in safe spaces for women and girls providing the perfect platform to explore issues of common interest, share successful practices and experiences, debate new concepts with a view to increasing the level of collaboration and collective impact. Courtyard sessions also provide an opportunity for women to network and join forces to demand action on issues, advocate for change and get community stakeholders' attention. As part of BORN and SHOW projects, courtyard sessions have addressed several gender equality issues including women's right to decision making, child early and forced marriage, reproductive health through advocacy to traditional/religious leaders as well as State actors.



## WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT ARMIES IN ETHIOPIA

In Ethiopia through a previous reproductive health project, Plan International worked with a women's mass-based structure representing the economic, social and political development of women in Ethiopia. This volunteer group, called the **Women's Development Army (WDA)**, is the community-level branch of a broader development extension system designed and established by the Ethiopian government to reach each household in the country with information and referral facilitation on core issues such as health. Each member of the WDA is the leader of 5 households in their community. She serves as a 'model' household, delivers key health and other information to the households in her group and importantly, acts as a their voice upwards in the health system, bringing concerns and challenges up to a broader group which is directly supervised by the local Health Extension Worker. The project worked with WDAs to strengthen their capacity, complementing government training with content on gender equality, male engage-

ment, gender-based violence and other key women's and girls' rights issues. These WDAs act as community-level advocates for women and girls health and issues and rights, and Plan International's **My Choice for My Life Project** funded by Global Affairs Canada is also partnering with WDAs to facilitate avenues for change in adolescent sexual and reproductive health and prevention of child marriage.

While WDAs or for that matter most mass-based structures established by governments around the world are not strictly women's rights organizations and there can be concern regarding the models in and of themselves, their mandate is women's development and as local structures they are connected with grassroots movements. Furthermore as members of these systems, women feel empowered to act on women's issues with them and can further strengthen the movement, as long as the challenges and sensitivities between government established and right-based groups are understood, capacity of government structures is built on gender equality and women's and girls' rights and feminist alliance building is facilitated keeping existing power relationships between these groups in mind.



## QUEEN MOTHERS IN GHANA— MOVERS AND SHAKERS OF CHANGE

In many parts of Ghana, women play important traditional leadership roles in their communities. Two such examples are the Queen Mothers, found mostly in Southern parts of Ghana, and Magajias, who are mostly found in Northern parts of Ghana.

Queen Mothers are found in almost all tribes in the Southern part of the country and are very prominent in the Ashanti Kingdom and the Krobo. Queen mothers are an important part of the Akan tradition, which is based on matrilineal descent. Selected from prominent families in their communities, **Queen Mothers rule alongside the chief of their communities and are considered spiritual heads of their communities. Queen Mothers participate and lead governance of their communities and can act as heads of their communities.** Queen mothers have all jurisdiction over women and girls and oversee issues that involve both men and women, such as gender based violence and spousal conflicts among others. Queen Mothers traditionally, support chiefs in enacting communal by-laws and mobilizing women’s groups. In addition, Queen Mothers advise and promote good cultural practices.

**Magajias are important female leaders in their communities and are selected based on their leadership of community activities and community groups.** Women from communities come together and elect a Magajia, based on her leadership and involvement in community activities. Magajias have well defined roles to play as far as women’s issues are concerned, and their influence centers on the welfare of women and girls. In addition, Queen Mothers and Magajias play important roles in formal community structures, such as Community Health Committees, where they either participate as members or where they continue to advocate for women rights and development.

As part of its efforts to support the empowerment of women and girls, the Plan International SHOW project in Ghana works with Queen Mothers and Magajias in several ways. In all eight districts of Ghana where the SHOW pro-

ject is working, **Queen Mothers and Magajias establish or link with women’s support groups** and hold discussions on health, women’s and girls’ rights and gender equality with women and girls, and sometimes men and boys, in their communities. Furthermore, these powerful women leaders seize the opportunity to educate and advocate for women’s rights on occasions such as market days, funerals and on outdoor ceremonies to build a grassroots movement for change. Additionally, **many Queen Mothers and Magajias act as mentors for adolescent groups in their communities.** For example, through initiatives like “An evening with adolescents”, Queen Mothers or Magajias and adolescents from the community come together to discuss health and gender equality; in these fora, adolescents are able to share the issues of most concern to them mobilizing action and at the same time building agency of young women and girls.

While the engagement with Queen Mothers and Magajias has been consistent and successful by SHOW in Ghana, the project could better engage with the National Association for Queen Mothers. Doing so, would allow for systematic and larger reach and more sustainability by leveraging the power of female leaders institutionally.



*A photo of Queen Mothers National Association Members and the Ghanaian President from a local newspaper*



## WORKING WITH INFORMAL WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' GROUPS

Plan International works with innumerable less structured “informal” women’s and girls groups in communities. Often these exist prior to Plan International interventions, or may be established with support by Plan International and its partners as part of a project’s activities in the form of women’s support groups, adolescent girls’ groups etc. These groups have unique mandates, and while their sustainability may not always be a large part of a program;

supporting the individual and collective agency of women who contribute to these groups is key to ensuring that the impacts of these organizations are long lasting. It is critical that women members feel empowered and feel they benefit directly from the groups they are part of in projects they help support. If this is achieved, a groundswell of grassroots action is mobilized towards a movement of change.

## GRANDMOTHERS IN SENEGAL: LEADING THE CHARGE FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Leveraging the critical influence of women leaders is an important component of fostering attitudinal and behavior change. Grandmothers in Senegal are key influencers and decision-makers in their families when it comes to women’s and girls’ rights and health, particularly sexual and reproductive health. As part of it’s work, the SHOW project in Senegal is working with grandmothers. The project has brought together grandmothers from the communities where it is implemented into grandmothers groups. In these groups, grandmothers come together to learn about sexual and reproductive health and rights and to discuss matters of gender equality, such as the right of women and girls to make decisions related to their reproductive health, the risks of child marriage and female genital mutilation, as well as how men can support their female partners through improved couple relationships. The grandmothers then take their knowledge and share this with their families at home. The grandmothers also engage in sharing this critical information with religious and traditional leaders in their communities to support gender equitable behaviours. As older women they hold community respect and are powerful drivers of change. More and more as we collaborate with grandmothers’ groups, we see them

actively taking up broader gender equality and women’s rights issues, advocating for change.

Grandmothers from Kaolack for example reported feeling a renewed energy from the group to support their daughters-in-law and to support their sons in fostering positive and non violent relationships with their wives.



*Members of grandmothers groups in Kaolack and Pikine*



## GIRLS: THE LEAD GENERATION DRIVING CHANGE

Adolescent girls face unique barriers and challenges due to their age and gender. Unlike adult women, who may have some agency, adolescent girls may often lack the autonomy to participate in groups or organizations that advocate and support their rights. Yet, adolescent girls have tremendous power and drive which with the right support, can lead to tremendous change in their homes, communities and countries.

Plan International works with adolescent girls' groups in a variety of ways always analyzing with girls, potential risks to them for participating and mitigation strategies. A best practice is to identify existing girls' groups or establish them tailored to the context of a program or project, and based on objectives that girls self-identify for their engagement in the groups for long-term sustainability and impact. Plan International's work has yielded groups of girls led by adult

facilitators (such as Champions of Change for Gender Equality and Girl' Rights), girls groups led by adolescent peer educators, girls groups which exists in schools, girls groups which are led by community mentors, such as female community leaders

Plan International views investment in **girls' groups as a critical factor of creating the next tier of young feminists and rights activists, crucial for movement building for gender equality and girls' rights**. Plan International engages girls groups in exercises of social accountability, participatory budgeting and working with civil society to monitor child, women and human rights. Finally, working with girls means placing them directly at the center of the discussion on their rights and their needs, recognizing their agency to make choices about their lives and capability to effect change.



## CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

Champions of Change is Plan International's flagship program working with adolescent girls and boys. The program brings together adolescent girls between the ages of 10 and 18 (sometimes divided into two groups of girls 10-14 years old and of girls 15-18 years old) into groups where they collectively undergo a transformative journey themselves **to learn, discuss, and plan actions around gender equality and their rights**. The girls groups also periodically meet with the boys groups from their community, so that boys and girls can champion gender equality in their communities together.

The Champions of Change curriculum engages girls on **a pathway to power through a series of modules which include interactive activities, group discussions and individual work**. The girls' journey focuses on building their self-esteem, strengthening their understanding of gender and how unequal gender norms impact them, learning about their sexual and reproductive

health rights and the changes brought on by puberty, discussing gender-based violence and how to address it, and finally how to take action in their communities to work towards gender equality. The girls' curriculum also includes modules on *Living Free from Child, Early and Forced Marriage* and *Being Safe in the City*. Additional modules on economic empowerment and peacebuilding are also being developed. The thrust of the program is to mobilize a youth-led movement as each group graduates and carries out outreach.

Plan International Canada includes Champions of Change as part of its gender transformative activities in several health projects, such as SHOW in Haiti, SRHR in Ethiopia, and Healthy Women and Girls in Mozambique. Champions of Change is also included as part of education projects, such as RAISE II in the Philippines, and the adolescent girl focused Plan 4 Girls project in Cameroon and Benin.

# ENGAGING WITH WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS: SOME LEARNINGS

While we engage routinely with women's and girls' organizations in our programs and projects, as always, we ask ourselves critical questions with the aim of improving practice and strengthening our learning. So what have we learned?

## True engagement with WOs means mutuality, reciprocity and equality

Our partnerships with women's organizations are often conceived as part of programmatic or project objectives. While programs and projects offer concrete platforms for engagement, they can compel WOs to divert from their core mandates to fit programming themes. It is important for our work with the organizations to define programmatic outcomes together, embed programmatic agendas in their core mandates as identified by them and led by them as experts of their contexts - taking feminist approaches to ensure the greatest impact and sustainability. This can often mean longer, wider and deeper consultation, that time and budget constrained programs may not have, requiring programming design to build in these necessary processes as well as jointly putting in place innovative mechanisms to ensure convergence and collective action - remembering we have as much to learn from WOs as they from us!

## Core institutional strengthening and investment in WOs is as important as programming

Capacity building of all local partner organizations is a core mandate of Plan International and a part and parcel of our engagement. However, core institutional support as **self-identified** by and differentiated to WOs, is critical. This could range from governance training to core staff funding to programming to networking to resource mobilization capacity support with a view to sustainability and empowerment and needs to be built into programs

and projects including a detailed participatory self-assessment process.

## Fostering young feminists and connecting them to the movement is essential

While this may happen organically in some contexts, it may not in others. Adolescent girls and their unique issues, being at the cusp of childhood and adulthood-often get left out either by organizations working on children's rights, or women's rights. Yet their inherent agency and dynamism have great potential, that needs to be brought into the rights movements.

## Working with all types of women's organizations and structures is key but challenging and potentially risky

In supporting women's and girls' rights movements in communities through our projects and programs, aligning with grassroots rights groups is critical, yet at the same time engaging other women's groups and actors who may not be aligned is important. Key to this is to ensure power relationships between these groups are well understood and platforms for egalitarian and inclusive dialogue are facilitated with women's rights groups in the lead.



## GE UPDATES

- We are poised to initiate an exciting program with Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) in Ethiopia and Ghana, funded under Global Affairs Canada's Women's Voice and Leadership Program. These feminist initiatives aim to provide grants to WROs and support WROs' institutional capacities as identified by them and led by them as well as boost collective advocacy. Stay tuned for more on this initiative as we go forward!
- Our Senior Gender Equality Advisor, Jenn Donville receives an award on March 8, 2019 in the Gender Equality category for the 2019 Canadian Partnership for Women and Children's Health (CanWaCH) Awards for Canadian Excellence in Women and Children's Health. This award is a testament to our thought leadership.
- Our Vice President Program Effectiveness and Quality, Emrul Hasan presented testimony before the Senate of Canada on December 5, 2018 underlining the importance of Canada's continued reassertion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as well as robust gender equality results measurement on the global stage.

## FEEDBACK AND NEXT BULLETIN

We hope this was useful! But we would love to hear your comments, questions, thoughts and topics that you would like to see in the next **Focus 'n GE!** Send a line to our amazing Technical Quality Officer, Daniela: [DDonia@plancanada.ca](mailto:DDonia@plancanada.ca)