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The Power to Lead Alliance – Empowering Girls to Learn and Lead in Malawi

Stephanie Baric, Senior Technical Advisor, CARE USA Basic and Girls' Education Unit
Norman Tembo, Education Sector Coordinator, CARE Malawi
Contact: sbaric@care.org

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Introduction

In recent years, interest in the issues surrounding adolescent girls has enjoyed a resurgence among development actors and donors interested in addressing poverty. Whereas significant gains have been made to help youth, especially girls, realize their potential as agents of transformation in their communities and societies, more needs to be done. Record investments in education and soaring numbers of students with access to primary education are met with the harsh reality that skills and competencies gained in most education systems are wholly inadequate to prepare young students as future leaders. Declining educational quality has meant poor uptake of new skills and less attention to critical thinking, problem solving, negotiation, communication and other important competencies for leadership development.

Moreover, girls suffer more acutely from the cumulative effects of the under-investment in human capacity development and lack of cultivation of leadership skills. With overall less free time than their male counterparts, they have less time for study or self-discovery play. They often assume traditional domestic roles and have fewer same-sex role models and mentors. Their care-giving roles in the family mean they stand to lose more of their childhood during hardships such as war, increased HIV in their communities, or food insecurity.

A Global Girls' Leadership Initiative

The emphasis on leadership is a unique but important element in the Power to Lead Alliance (PTLA) project funded by the United States Agency for International Development and implemented by CARE in the following six countries: Honduras, Egypt, Malawi, India, Yemen and Tanzania. Leadership skills can help girls to better articulate their needs, protect their personal assets, participate in decision-making, and, overall, shape their futures. As described by Conner and Strobe (2007), youth leaders are those who “think for themselves, communicate their thoughts and feelings to others, and help others understand and act on their own beliefs.” Girls need to be able to identify problems and issues, take on increasing

responsibility, and have an impact in their current environment (Schoenberg & Salmond, 2007).

Following a secondary literature review and expert informant interviews conducted by CARE (Baric et al, 2009), it was determined that characteristics of good leaders can be organized into five categories: voice, decision-making, confidence, organization, and vision. Included in these categories are concepts such as assertiveness, determination, critical thinking, organization aptitude, focus, tolerance, decisiveness, self-confidence, self-discipline, charisma, time management, social competence, communication, and sensitivity to the needs of others.

PTLA supports program activities in an effort to create, strengthen and scale leadership opportunities for girls. The project includes three objectives with the first one cultivating opportunities for girls to practice their leadership skills. Leadership opportunities include: extra-curricular activities, social networks for girls and opportunities to participate in civic action. Girls need outlets where they can develop their social skills, intellect, and leadership through supervised, structured activities. PTLA promotes these activities by supporting, for example, participation and leadership in sports teams, student government, technology clubs, and youth groups. Equally important to leadership development is an ability to interact with others. In collectives and groups, girls have an opportunity to learn by taking on leadership roles themselves and also by observing their peers in those roles. In addition, peer networks teach girls how to resolve conflict, deal with setbacks, and become more accepting of others. PTLA facilitates girls' groups and a variety of collective actions. The program also develops girl leaders through activities in the surrounding community. Voluntary civic action helps girls to be seen and heard in the community, and it stimulates a general spirit of community goodwill. Furthermore, it engages the community by deepening its stake in the growth and development of girls. Positive, successful experiences in and with these supportive environments, relationships and community activities increases girls opportunities to brainstorm solutions, believe in their ideas and abilities, express themselves confidently in large and small groups, and try to influence others. Participation builds girls' leadership skills (e.g., negotiation, communication, and decision making), knowledge about leadership (e.g., information about her roles and responsibilities in a democracy), beliefs and attitudes, and self confidence.

PTLA interventions focus on girls, ages 10 to 14. The focus on this age group serves multiple purposes:

- It acknowledges adolescence as a critical period of transition in life, and a time where many girls in the developing world must progress very rapidly and abruptly from childhood to adulthood.
- Girls in this age group are finishing primary school. Most of PTLA's efforts are paired with complementary programming to increase enrollment and retention of girls in secondary school.
- It acknowledges the “in between” period of 10 through 14 years is a very critical from many different angles. Age 10 is the onset of puberty for many girls, clearly signaling the end of childhood in many societies. For many cultures there is no concept of adolescence; children move directly into adult roles, and the transition can be traumatic for girls (and boys) in most cultures. Many girls are married at this age, and with a subsequent move to the husband's family, they are expected to behave within rigid gendered roles and assume the heavy responsibilities expected of adult women. Mobility is sharply reduced. From a development perspective this is the age of accelerated physical and cognitive changes. Cognitively, children at this stage are more ready to deal with abstract concepts, to question and ask “why”, and to begin to define their identities. This time of great social, physical, cognitive and emotional flux is a crucial moment to harness girls' development in a positive way, to give them a chance to discover themselves, to explore and redefine their identities, and to make a difference in their lives and lives of others.

The design of PTLA is largely based on a global impact study, conducted by CARE, on women's empowerment that focused on the treatment of gender and power in more than 40 projects across the globe. The research highlighted how the majority of projects enhanced women and girls' agency through strategies to improve education, income and decision-making. The study also found inadequate attention to structures (an enabling environment created through policies and participation) and relations (supportive family and communities) that govern their ability to realize their full and sustained empowerment. PTLA draws on reflections from this study by ensuring girls develop leadership competencies (agency); the rights of girls are promoted through advocacy and policy engagement at the community, national and international level (structures); and by working with communities and families to support girls' leadership (relations).

Catalyzing Action for Girls' Rights

In addition to supporting opportunities for leadership development, PTLA emphasizes partnerships including technical leadership and knowledge sharing, increased resources, and operational excellence. CARE firmly believes that the development of youth, and girls in particular, is an issue that requires the cooperation of multiple actors. Furthermore, it recognizes that public and private actors together have resources and influence that can help change the lives of girls.

Partners under PTLA are engaging not only by bringing financial and technical resources but also as energized advocates for girls' rights. The Alliance is a mechanism that works at multiple levels:

- Globally, PTLA provides an opportunity for multi-national corporations, private donors and bi-lateral donors to pool funds to maximize impact.
- In the United States (US), the Alliance provides an opportunity to share knowledge around girls' empowerment through structured discussions and dialogue about good practices.
- At the national level, PTLA in developing countries provides a mechanism for local NGOs to mobilize around girls' empowerment and conduct activities to enhance girls' leadership.
- At the community level, the project develops relationships for girls – champions, role models and mentors to support girls' empowerment.

Furthermore, PTLA is a unique public-private partnership that brings exciting new resources to development programming. In addition to financial support, corporate actors bring opportunities to exercise political influence, employee engagement in appropriate ways (such as mentoring programs), technology, and specific technical expertise. Non-profit actors such as CARE and local partners bring years of experience in social change processes and community engagement, and public sector partners, such as USAID and national governments, bring a shared learning agenda, unique political influence, and the wealth of experience from other projects and programs.

Building Girl Leaders in Malawi

Drawing connections between schooling, gender, poverty and other forms of discrimination and subordination, PTLA builds on the women's empowerment impact study conducted by CARE in addition to the Situation Analysis Study Report for Marginalized Girls in Kasungu District, Malawi completed by CARE Malawi in January 2009. According to the study, findings "showed that while Malawi has made great strides in getting many children into schools, there are many hurdles for survival in school for girls as they hit puberty. There are a lot of misconceptions about girls being dull, needing more encouragement to stay in school, and expectations that they should marry early, that boys are future leaders and that generally parents support girls' schooling much less than boys, for financial, cultural and other reasons. Many boys, girls, and parents who participated in the research felt that schooling may not be very useful to girls, and the nature of the constraints that girls face in getting to, staying in, and achieving in school are generally different those of boys. Girls are pushed out of school by early entry into marriage and parenting and a host of negative attitudes to their education while boys who leave school generally do so to become involved in money makers activities. In addition girls have many fewer options to return to school than do boys."

The situational analysis has guided the work of the Alliance in Malawi in community mobilization for girls' education and how the social status of girls prevents them from experiencing equitable opportunities in school and participation in extra-curricular activities such as sports or social networks due to workload. Project activities include gender sensitive, child-centered teaching and learning methods and pedagogies. PTLA facilitates Training of Trainers workshops for CARE staff and teachers in child rights, especially girls' rights to education.

Given that the study also determined that "socially, there is lots of evidence that schools and classroom are not regularly protective of or gender-sensitive towards girls. There is widespread reporting of verbal and sometimes physical [and sexual] abuse from pupils and teachers towards the girls" there are strategies under PTLA to address sexual and gender based violence (SGBV). Related activities include raising awareness about their rights and building assertiveness among girls and developing school governance systems to respond to rights violations including a Code of Conduct for teachers who are perpetrators of sexual abuse of female students. The project also works with boys through messaging about the

importance of gender equitable behaviors but also giving boys the space to begin to reflect on masculinities and why gender norms and attitudes that lead to the discrimination of girls are also harmful to them (e.g., multiple partners leads to increased vulnerability to HIV/AIDS). Through extra-curricular activities, as an example, boys see girls step out of traditional gender roles by playing soccer, considered a “boys” sport. Boys also play netball which is considered a “girls” sport. Activities also include School Management Committees (SMCs) trained on whole school management that will prepare them to play a more critical role in girls’ leadership development. Girls are given the opportunity to provide input on School Improvement Plans developed by the SMCs.

With the focus on leadership skills development or girls’ agency, activities in Malawi under PTLA include a mix of academic and after school programs such as reading circles that provide reading materials to girls’ clubs according to areas of focus (i.e., if a club focuses on HIV/AIDS, reading materials on the subject are provided); science camps; quiz clubs for girls to develop confidence to speak in public; mentor camps; life skills clubs (also called anti-HIV/AIDS clubs) that give girls safe spaces to discuss the life challenges they face; participatory education theatre used to reach out to other learners with messages on SGBV prevention and reporting, non-discrimination for those who are HIV/AIDS positive and affected learners; and mothers’ groups who mentor and counsel girls and provide spaces for girls to speak out on issues impeding their right to education and conduct back to school campaigns.

Building Strategic Partnerships for Girl Leaders in Malawi

CARE USA and CARE Malawi have been working collaboratively to link partners, in the South and North, to promote girls’ leadership in Malawi. In Malawi, CARE has been working with multi-national corporations to sponsor girls’ leadership in meaningful ways such as the Join My Village initiative, a US based consumer advocacy initiative supported by General Mills that seeks to increase awareness about and financial support for girls’ education in Malawi. CARE is also working with local organizations such as the Center for Sustainable Development and the Creative Center for Community Mobilisation to increase the capacity of civil society to address girls’ empowerment, and at the community level with mothers’ groups and School Management Committees in support of girls’ education and leadership. CARE plays a critical role in mobilizing support and participation in the Alliance

at the global and US levels by encouraging technical support from the South, such as working with Instituto Promundo, a Southern organization, to adapt the gender equitable men scale, developed for their program in Brazil, to young adolescent boys in the countries participating in PTLA, so that they may begin to critically reflect on their own perceptions of gender and support girls' leadership. Another example of international collaboration is sharing lessons learned with the Girl Scouts of America and connecting girls in the US with girls in Malawi to mobilize them around the critical role that girls' education and leadership play in addressing poverty.

Conclusion

PTLA provides a unique model for leadership skills development among young adolescent girls that builds on research and lessons learned around supporting girls' education and providing them with the assets and opportunities to engage in decision-making processes that affect their lives. The Alliance also provides a model for developing strategic partnerships between North and South stakeholders to champion girls' rights.

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