



# The Power of Adolescent Girls

LEARNING FROM FIRELIGHT FOUNDATION AND GRASSROOTS GIRLS INITIATIVE

**W**omen's economic empowerment programming has historically focused on adult women. The Firelight Foundation (Firelight) is working to change that thinking and educate the international development community that adolescent girls are income earners, caretakers, decision makers, and at times, breadwinners. The Firelight Foundation, whose mission is grounded in their belief in the power of communities to create lasting change for vulnerable youth affected by poverty and HIV/AIDS, adapted and piloted an innovative approach aimed at harnessing the power of adolescent girls in Rwanda.

Firelight was handpicked to become a member of the Grassroots Girls Initiative (GGI). GGI is a consortium of eight intermediary donor organizations, selected and funded by the Nike Foundation, to pilot an innovative and holistic framework for adolescent girls' programming. Defining adolescent girls varies across organizations and countries, as it is tied to culture and context. Ages can range from as young as 10 years old, to anywhere between 17 and 19 years of age.

Firelight worked in Rwanda before they were selected to become a member of GGI. Over time, the foundation found that its grantees were working more and more with women and girls through their initiatives. Firelight's director of programs,



## Key Info



**COUNTRY**  
Rwanda



**TARGET POPULATION**  
Adolescent girls



**APPROACH**  
Business and entrepreneurship;  
Interpersonal training and  
networking; Vocational training



Zanele Sibanda, shares that that their grantees determine who to support based on vulnerability, and targeting need through this lens always ends up prioritizing women and girls. “When you define vulnerability within the community and you look at the intersection of poverty and AIDS, women and children are more affected. Women and girls have higher rates of HIV infection and are the ones in the caregiving role.”

The GGI consortium spent one year collecting data to better understand the circumstances of adolescent girls. Firelight’s grantees were finding that girls have distinct vulnerabilities. Zanele notes, “In each case, the organizations were able to tell us really powerful and compelling experiences of what was happening and how they were trying to respond to it.” One grantee organization in Rwanda, that was working to raise awareness about HIV, quickly learned that bringing attention to the issue was not enough. The feedback from the beneficiary communities was resounding: “You are raising our awareness of HIV,

fetching water and firewood.

The need to support these girls was apparent. Girls were already

demonstrating strength and resilience, so the question became: What could organizations do to harness that power, amplify their voices, and build a sturdy support system? If girls develop skills, are supported, and make choices within their families and communities at a young age, can they break their cycle of poverty before they are marginalized by insurmountable barriers?

Through GGI, Firelight provided support to two organizations in Rwanda, each over three years. The longevity of each grant was important in establishing a holistic approach. Firelight worked with each grantee to adapt the overall program approach to their context, and then trained both grantees on the

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but we also have people who are already sick!” As a result, the organization decided to train volunteers to do in-home care for HIV-affected households. What they discovered on those home visits changed their perspective and in turn, Firelight’s. In most cases, adolescent girls were carrying the burden of care for their families. Girls were caring for younger siblings and sick parents, while also trying to earn an income and manage household duties, such as cooking and

adolescent girls’ programming toolkit developed by Population Council. The toolkit provides a framework on building girls’ assets.

The project aimed to economically empower adolescent girls by addressing five asset areas that account for the role of personal and social factors in economic empowerment. Zanele explains, “If you only look at the income of a girl but you don’t

address her self-esteem, self-efficacy, or her skills and knowledge, she'll take two steps forward but in one of those areas, she'll be sent 10 steps back. Even the gain that you made gets erased."

Firelight's grantees selected cohorts of girls in the first year and worked with them to develop their personal, social, human, financial, and physical assets. Girls in each cohort developed self-awareness, life skills,

Adolescent girls were selected by each grantee based on vulnerability. Once in a cohort, the girls were empowered to choose their income generating activity. Zanele shared an example from a small group of girls that self-selected to become tailors.

The girls met weekly to develop relationships, and have a safe space to talk about issues. They learned tailoring and sewing techniques, while undergoing

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and decision-making abilities (personal assets). The grantees aimed to strengthen the girls' relationships and support networks (social assets) and build their knowledge and skills (human assets). One key component here was developing safe spaces for the girls to come together weekly to learn, overcome challenges, and celebrate together. The girls were educated on various topics ranging from sexual and reproductive health, to money management and other business topics.

The girls also received different tools to support their particular economic activity (financial and physical assets). They underwent rigorous financial literacy and business skills trainings, set up individual and group savings plans, and, at the end of the training cycle, received the equipment and/or the capital necessary to start their business.

business skills and financial literacy trainings. At the end of the training, the girls received a sewing machine and some capital to start their business. Upon receiving the sewing machine, each girl, a family member, and a community member were all asked to sign an agreement stating that the equipment was specifically intended for the girl. This collective agreement ensured that she would be supported and her capital and equipment would be protected. In turn, all of the girls were asked to mentor other program participants. The component that most illustrates




the impact of this initiative was the power the girls demonstrated over their assets.

“Girls are often able to earn, but then someone else controls that income. These girls were actually making decisions about their money on a personal, business, and family level, and also making other non-financial decisions within their families, households, and even within intimate partner relationships.” The girls learned throughout the project cycle to diversify their asset base and develop a sense of independence. Zanele visited Rwanda at the end of the project cycle and described hearing many of the mothers talk about how they never imagined that their daughters could accomplish everything that they did. This transformation forced them to see the girls as partners in tackling problems and as valuable resources to support the family well-being.

Adolescent girls in Rwandan communities are changing norms and creating opportunities for themselves, their families, and their communities. One girl funded through the Firelight grants wanted to have a store, so she built the building herself, stocked it, and hired an employee. Some of the other girls participating in this initiative had been homeless or lived in very dire conditions. They used their income to afford rent in a better living space, and some built new homes. Zanele describes the change that Firelight observed in the girls over the three years of the project: “They developed significant self-confidence and a greater ability to make decisions and not feel like, ‘Oh, this is what’s happening to me;’ but really be able to take a proactive stance to make changes in their lives.”

## Meet Rehema

When Zanele visited Rwanda, she met a girl who developed a real knack for working with other girls. Zanele took her on a site visit to meet a group of young girls. She recalls, “I could not get these girls to talk and Rehema, I don’t know what she did or what she said, but suddenly the floodgates opened. She had this ability and it was just amazing to watch her.” By the time Rehema was 15 years old, she had lost both her parents. Her sister moved away to the capital to find work. While living in Kigali, her sister passed away from AIDS. Rehema was left alone to care for her younger siblings. A neighbor, who was part of a cooperative started by a Firelight Foundation partner, got Rehema involved. Rehema joined the beekeeping cooperative. By selling honey, she started earning an income. She could pay for school fees for her sisters. She later learned hairdressing, which earned her enough money to buy goats, build a house, and buy clothes. In 2012, Rehema learned how to take photos and videos as part of the digital storytelling initiative. Rehema gained confidence to speak out. She has now presented her story, and the plight of girls in her community at the local, district, and national levels. She has been interviewed by journalists and met with representatives from various donors, embassies, and the Department for International Development (DFID). Rehema coordinates safe spaces for adolescent girls. She has also become a paralegal, providing legal advice for girls. In addition, she has a small micro-enterprise taking pictures and videos at weddings. But most importantly, Rehema has gained her voice and confidence.



Finding partners that have deep community roots, know how to navigate community dynamics, and understand the specific issues that adolescent girls face was crucial to the successful implementation of Firelight's funding. According to Zanele, finding the right grantee is as important as structuring programs to take a holistic approach. One of the grantees selected for this initiative had been doing remarkable work with female child soldiers. Girls

beneficiaries and allow Firelight to develop grantees' capabilities. Zanele spoke of the importance of good communication systems to foster trust between donor and grantee and strengthen the partnership.

To institute a sustainable dialogue around the power of adolescent girls, Firelight helped each grantee to create learning circles with five organizations working in the same communities. These organizations were

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are largely invisible in child soldier discussions and programming, as these focus almost exclusively on boys. Paying attention to this reality and the complexity of issues that girls face impressed Firelight, who looks for grantees that are deeply connected to their communities, and have a track record of addressing their unique challenges. This establishes a baseline of trust between Firelight and grantees.

“The core strengths we brought to the initiative were our emphases on (1) capacity building of organizations, (2) long-term partnership, and (3) the desire to learn, document, and share our learning,” describes Zanele. Firelight's grantmaking model is about more than just giving money away; the foundation helps fill in gaps, build capacity, and strengthen organizational development of grantees over the course of their partnerships, which last an average of seven years. Multi-year partnerships allow grantees the time to make a more lasting impact on

not targeting adolescent girls specifically but were including girls in their work on some level. They used the learning circle meetings to explore questions such as, “Why do girls need special programming?” and “What key issues are they facing in our district?” Each learning circle participant reached the intended goal—seeing the need to intervene. As a result, these organizations received small, ‘catalyst’ grants from Firelight to initiate specific activities for girls within their programming. Two learning circle organizations received funding to attend a regional training on girl-centered programming in Nairobi. The goal was to build not only capacity, but also a network of organizations invested in and advocating for adolescent girls to ensure that their needs continue to be prioritized and addressed beyond this three-year initiative. Zanele remarks, “I think knowing the girls, being strategic in helping the organizations fill in the gaps, and the long-term commitment with holistic support is what really created long-term change... transformative change.”

With the right economic empowerment,  
adolescent girls gain life-transforming power and  
become agents of change.

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