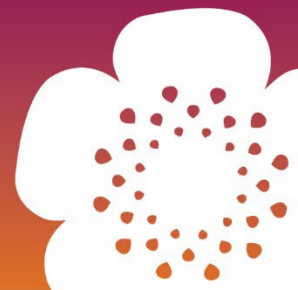


Supporting Youth-Led Feminist Actors and Organizations across West and Central Africa: Lessons Learned



Background

A new wave of youth-led initiatives for women’s rights, including sexual and reproductive health (SRH), is spreading across the West and Central Africa region. While it has not yet reached the same level as the “me too” movement, it is a constellation of virtual and in-person networks of activists who demand change and need support. In this region, gender-based violence (GBV) is rampant, as evidenced by instances of child marriage, domestic and sexual violence, genital mutilation, trafficking, and exploitation. In 2013, the World Health Organization reported that the rate of intimate partner violence in Sub-Saharan Africa far exceeded the global average of 6.4%.¹ Central Africa reported the highest number of cases, with a rate of 65.6%, followed by West Africa at 41.8%.² To help address this issue, EngenderHealth sought to amplify the voices of activists and feminist organizations with the aim of ensuring decision makers heard the voices of GBV survivors. These activists and organizations are putting pressure on governments to address the root causes and consequences of GBV.

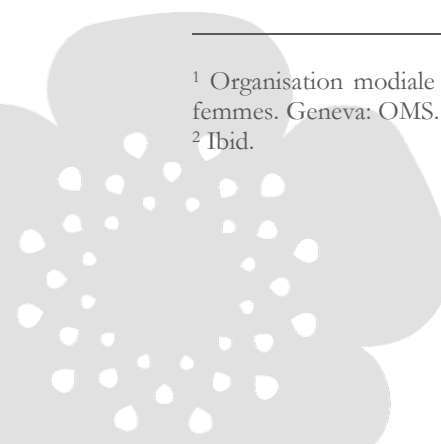
Present in the region since 1977, EngenderHealth promotes women’s rights, leads preventive action against GBV, and improves services for GBV survivors through high-quality, gender-equitable programs that advance sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, EngenderHealth’s Advance Advocacy on Comprehensive Abortion Care in West Africa project aims to help reduce maternal mortality and morbidity related to unsafe abortion in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Côte d’Ivoire. In addition to working closely with the target countries’ governments to improve access to comprehensive abortion care, the project also works with civil society and youth-led organizations in the region to reduce risk factors associated with GBV and to promote access to integrated SRH services. Crucial to this work is the recognition that international organizations and donors often bring young activists and feminist organizations to conferences and events, and while this is necessary, it is not enough. Additional efforts to mobilize them, celebrate them, and create with them spaces for dialogues and exchanges of experiences (at the local, national, and regional levels) are necessary to better advance the SRHR agenda and ensure it is grounded in feminist principles and the lived experiences and expertise of those most impacted.



Photo credit: Fontaine NOUTANGNI (JVS)
Young activists and feminist organization with EngenderHealth and Netherland Embassy staff during Benin’s in-site session

¹ Organisation mondiale de la Santé (OMS). 2013. Estimations mondiales et régionales de la violence à l’encontre des femmes. Geneva: OMS. <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/9789241564625/fr/>.

² Ibid.



Partnership Approach and Activities

A key component of the Advance Advocacy on Comprehensive Abortion Care in West Africa project is mobilizing and creating a partnership between influential activists, social media experts, and community members to increase awareness of and address the many GBV issues common in the region. This partnership comprises a range of members, including female social media and web influencers, journalists, female entrepreneurs, students living with disabilities, GBV survivors and those who have witnessed multiple acts of GBV, as well as police officers. The project organized a kick-off meeting in each country to share experiences and identify key issues to resolve around GBV, namely: (1) What are we going to do? (2) How are we going to do it? (3) How can we move forward as a community, and (4) What are the key values and principles of collaboration we need to succeed? Three key principles guided the establishment of this partnership (see textbox). By upholding these principles, EngenderHealth and the members of this partnership were able to create a common vision around the promotion of gender equality and the fight against the patriarchy while simultaneously identifying and responding to challenges related to the political structure, power holders, and cultural beliefs and practices that prevent people from fully and freely exercising their SRHR.

Three Key Partnership Principles

- **Respect and appreciation** for the lived experiences and needs of young people
- **Trust**
- **Accountability** to move the youth feminist agenda forward

In October 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, EngenderHealth began working with this partnership to advance GBV prevention efforts in the region as a part of the 16 Days of Activism against GBV Campaign, an annual international campaign that starts with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (25 November) and lasts until Human Rights Day (10 December). Recognizing that the campaign seeks to organize individuals and organizations around the world for the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls, and the challenges activists and feminist organizations face in accessing formal spaces of decision-making power, this partnership mobilized to elevate and amplify the crucial voices of its members. EngenderHealth worked with activists and feminist organizations to create safe discussion spaces for them to share their experiences and helped them recognize, prevent, and overcome the burnout resulting from their activism and engagement.

We supported activities in Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali from November 26 to December 22 in collaboration with the diplomatic representations of Canada and the Netherlands. In each of the five countries, we contacted the diplomatic representations of Canada (Côte d'Ivoire) and the Netherlands (Benin, Burkina, Burundi, and Mali) to request a secure and friendly space to allow members to discuss and propose solutions to address widespread GBV. The project acknowledged that a safe space would foster an open dialogue, create a sense of community, and allow for synergies among members. Due to COVID-19, the Mali session occurred online through a webinar, while the other four country sessions occurred in-person, with strict COVID-19 prevention protocols. The sessions started with participant testimonies focusing on their own experiences with burnout. The project organized group discussions based on three themes: (1) How to create and maintain an environment favorable to the expression of feminism; (2) How to recognize, prevent, manage, and overcome the burnout resulting from operating in unequal power structures that

systematically undermine the voices of feminists and grassroots networks; and (3) How to work together and move forward as a community. Group discussions allowed for participants to identify key challenges in each country, considering the key principles of feminism, and to develop recommendations and chart a path forward.

Partnership Results

Dialogues across the five countries provided opportunities for expression and exchange of experiences for young feminists who celebrated their choice and journey despite the many obstacles they faced. A total of 108 girls and women and 36 boys and men

between the ages of 15 and 35 participated in the in-person sessions and webinar organized as part of the 16 Days of Activism campaign (see textbox). These activities resulted in the creation of new communities of feminists and activist organizations operating through WhatsApp groups (one in each country). They also resulted in the development of action plans for advancing SRHR in each country. During the sessions, participants expressed the desire to establish a regional-level space for continuous dialogue around the youth feminist agenda and to ensure cohesion between the local, national, and regional advocacy levels.

Session Participation by Country

- **Bénin:** 23 participants (18 women, 5 men)
- **Côte d'Ivoire:** 43 participants (30 women, 13 men)
- **Burkina:** 25 participants (23 women, 3 men)
- **Burundi:** 13 participants (10 women, 3 men)
- **Mali:** 40 participants (28 women, 12 men)

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

One of the most important lessons we have learned is that partnership with other stakeholders is a key factor in achieving outcomes related to advancing SRHR and gender equity. We also learned how the collective power of influential young women (including bloggers, YouTubers, web influencers, women entrepreneurs, journalists, and police officers) can advance the SRHR agenda broadly as well as GBV prevention and response efforts specifically. Inviting these influential women to collaborate with other feminist activists and organizations ultimately created a broader community that together motivated each other and used their influence and power to advance the feminist agenda, which includes advancing SRHR, comprehensive abortion care, and GBV across West Africa. Our project has leveraged and mobilized young activists and feminist organizations, web influencers (as new allies, and additional resources to advocate for improvements in SRHR. Bringing together actors in safe spaces enabled us to elevate and amplify the voices of young feminist leaders while fostering dialogues and inclusive processes. All those involved have learned more about the activities and challenges of others, creating common ground among partners and showcasing the value of partnership. To expand upon the success of these partnerships, we have created a list of recommendations for key stakeholders engaged in partnership efforts (see Table 1).

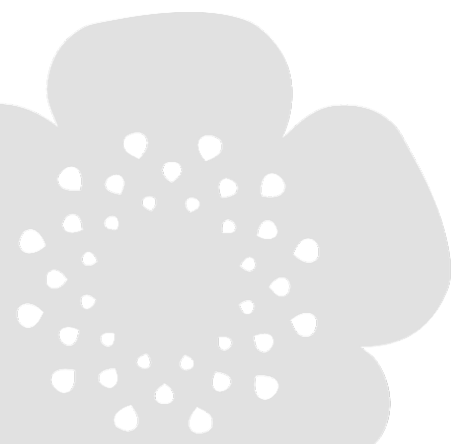


Table 1. Recommendations

Audience	Recommendations
Donors	Make funds available to organizations of all sizes (especially feminist organizations) and encourage experience sharing, collaboration, and joint platforms between young activists and feminist organizations, implementing organizations, and government actors.
Activists and Feminists	Mobilize influential young women (e.g., bloggers, YouTubers, web influencers, women entrepreneurs, journalists, and police officers) and use their collective power to advance the SRHR agenda and address GBV issues.
NGOs	Mobilize local funds to work collaboratively with young activists and feminist organizations.
Policy Makers	Prioritize partnerships and collaboration with the healthcare systems, young activists, and feminist organizations to ensure that SRH and GBV policy and advocacy efforts reflect the lived experiences and expertise of these groups.

Call to Action

By working together and supporting the work of young activists and feminist organizations in the region, technical assistance organizations, like EngenderHealth, can enhance their impact and ultimately deliver more responsive and effective programming. Despite the need, there are a dearth of initiatives in the West and Central Africa region that focus on the well-being of young activists and feminist organizations who are advancing SRHR. These young people are taking personal risks by speaking publicly and posting on social networks to defend a more just world where women can act freely and make lifestyle choices and decisions around their SRH without fear of judgment.

“It is activists and feminists who storm the spaces to speak out, demand action...to advance the rights of girls and women. Unfortunately, these are the same activists who find themselves increasingly forgotten in the system. Yet, on their well-being will depend on the advancement of SRHR in the region.”

Chaneline Mevowanou, Benin

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