

West Africa Adolescent Girls Summit

April 2022

John W. Gbedze Beach Resort – Marshall, Liberia

The *first* West Africa Adolescent Girls Summit (AGS) began on Tuesday 12th April, as more than a hundred adolescent girls and boys (aged 13-19 years old) came together at John W. Gbedze Beach Resort in Marshall, Liberia to advocate for gender equality and partake in a week of skills training, team building, and campaign activities.

With adolescents representing Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ethiopia and more than two dozen government institutions, UN agencies, and international NGOs in attendance, the AGS laid the foundations for a platform where girls and boys can work together to develop their collective capacity for advocacy, and campaign for gender equality in their communities, their countries, and throughout the African continent.



Why Adolescents?

Work with children and youth, particularly in the international development sector, is often focused either on education in the early years (0-11) or engagement with young adults (19-25).

This can lead to a lack of intentional spaces where adolescents (13-19) are able to come together, build relationships, develop their networks, and have their voices heard.

The AGS aimed to fill this gap, by developing a safe space for both adolescent girls and boys.

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Adolescent-led planning process

From the outset, the adolescents took the lead on all aspects of preparing and planning for the event. With support from GFC, our community-led partners and the Youth Coalition for Education in Liberia (co-opted by GFC to provide technical support to the process), a core group of girls and boys from Liberia and Sierra Leone formed a planning committee in early 2021, which then met regularly in the year running up to the Summit. They were determined that the Summit itself should engage both girls *and* boys and worked to ensure that Adolescents from communities that are often denied a voice and a platform were represented.

After identifying and reflecting on a wide range of issues facing girls in their local communities, the group developed the objectives, designed the logo, agreed on the theme, and drafted the agenda of the Summit. The committee proposed holding the summit during school holidays to avoid any of the adolescents missing out on vital education. With the Christmas holidays seen as a time for family, and Covid-19 presenting logistical challenges throughout 2021, the committee decided to hold the Summit during the Easter holidays in April 2022. They identified a suitable venue just outside of the Liberian capital, Monrovia with the space and safety required for an Adolescents' gathering. A WhatsApp group was set up for the planning team and smartphones were provided to Adolescent girls and boys in rural areas to facilitate their participation in online discussions.

“The most difficult part of the planning process for me were the Zoom meetings. It was my first time attending a meeting online, I could hardly see who was speaking, the network was challenging, and I found it difficult to understand all of the discussions. I overcame this challenge by repeatedly asking the adult assistants and peers to explain to me what they understood from the discussions and trying to listen keenly. The thing that surprised me the most was the provision of mobile phones to us in order to ease our work planning the Summit – this approach is one of a kind.”

Augusta H. Yokie (17 years old, Sierra Leone)

“My challenge has always been to speak in public. As someone who was born and raised in a small community with limited opportunities to express myself, I find it super difficult to speak among my peers. Through the support of GFC in bringing us together, I have been able to overcome that challenge. My trip to the Adolescent Girls Summit in Liberia was my first experience of travel and was a real cultural shock. I was surprised at so many things. I thought it was impossible for me to ever travel out of my country and my comfort zone.”

Gitta Brima (18 years old, Sierra Leone)

Working with GFC, YOCEL, and our partners to raise both funding and awareness, the Summit initiative was entirely youth-led from start to finish. In the weeks running up to the event, the planning committee produced a [promotional video](#) that was shared on social media.

On Monday 10th April 2022, the Adolescents girls and boys from the planning committee arrived at the venue to set up, sharpen their facilitation skills, and expand their knowledge of how they could use social media to amplify their voices and advocate for their communities.

With everything in place, and the excitement building, the Adolescent Girls Summit could officially begin!

The Summit Diary

Monday - As the planning committee arrived at the venue on Monday, April 11th, the energy in anticipation of the week ahead was running high. The girls and boys, most of whom had never met before in person, were encouraged to sit next to someone they didn't know, introduce themselves, and talk about why they had come to the summit and what they were hoping to learn.

With introductions out of the way the real work could then begin! During the planning sessions held in the run-up to the summit the adolescents had expressed a desire to learn more around how they could use social media to campaign on and advocate for the issues they face in their communities.

The adolescents spoke about the different social media platforms they liked to use personally and discussed how they could use those very same platforms to develop their capacity for advocacy. After talking through examples of previously successful campaigns that they could build on, the adolescents split into small groups and armed with their mobile phone cameras set about developing campaigns around issues that they had collectively identified.



Campaign leads: Binta Fatmata Bah (14 years old, Sierra Leone), Alpha Turay (17 years old, Sierra Leone), Joyce Seth Efe Yimbil (13 years old, Liberia), Salomie Hajai Weah (19 years old, Liberia), Mary Koroma (18 years old, Sierra Leone).

Tuesday - In the morning, the planning committee were joined by other adolescents from both urban and rural areas of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ethiopia. Following a Welcoming Ceremony from the adolescents from Liberia, introductions to all of the stakeholders in attendance and an overview of the safeguarding protocols in place for the event, the Adolescents split into five separate groups, each of which identified a specific issue that they would focus their attention on for the week:

1. Promoting the **Rights and Responsibilities** of Adolescents
2. Advocating for **Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)**
3. Keeping Girls in School and Demanding **Education for All**
4. Ending **Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)**
5. Addressing **Harmful Traditional Practices (FGM)**

GFC convened community-led partners and a range of international partners (including Plan International Liberia Office, the African Union Liaison Office Ethiopia, UNICEF, UNWOMEN, UNFPA, RFSU, DKT International, Medica Liberia, Action Aid and CITITRUST) all of whom had either sponsored the participation of individual adolescent girls and boys or contributed financially to the Summit costs.



The partners worked together to create safe spaces where the Adolescents could share their perspectives on the issues outlined above and then collectively develop their capacity for advocacy.

“As the Education Director from USAID, just to listen to all of you Adolescents directly on what is important and what solutions you think can solve some of the challenges we are all working on is very important. This will help us in our planning, and we will take your voices into consideration”

Anh Pham - Education Office Director, USAID

Wednesday – On day 2 of the Summit the Adolescents had the opportunity to interact with a diverse group of both national and international stakeholders including:

1. **Government** – Representatives from the Ministries of Internal Affairs and Gender, Children and Social Protection in Liberia, the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs in Sierra Leone, and the Embassy of Sierra Leone in Liberia.
2. **INGOs** – Representatives from UNICEF, UNWomen, UNFPA, USAID, PLAN International Liberia, Plan International African Union Liaison Office, Action Aid, Medica Liberia, RFSU, Kvinna till Kvinna and DKT International.
3. **Civil Society organizations and Community leaders** – WONGOSOL, WAVES, CASE SALONE, CHI, IDP4T, Accountability Lab, RAINBOW, and senior religious leaders
4. **Business** – CITITRUST Savings and Loans

With an emphasis on facilitating intergenerational conversation and providing a platform for the girls and boys to have their opinions heard, the five issue-focused groups presented their campaigns and were encouraged to both ask questions of and demand action from all of the adults in attendance.



“We are very excited to be part of this great initiative. Today I learnt there is power in collective voice. I was very impressed by the boys who told me that they are going to tell their peers to change their negative behavior towards girls”

Maybe Garmai Livingstone - National Programme Specialist, UNFPA

“I learnt a lot from the Adolescents because the experiences from their different communities will help me improve my work and my planning. Those questions asked by Adolescents had a great impact on me. Working together will be very impactful”

Charlyn Davis Worzie – Director for Gender & Social Inclusion, Ministry of Internal Affairs Liberia

Following a day of constructive and open conversations between the Adolescents and the stakeholders, the Adolescents were encouraged to start thinking about their Calls to Action. Following the mantra of *no work without play*, Wednesday's session came to a close with an evening of karaoke!

Thursday – The morning session started with a Panel discussion with senior representatives from the government of Sierra Leone, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), the National Civil Society Council of Liberia, and the Plan International African Union Liaison Office Ethiopia. After introducing the roles of the different institutions both at the national and regional level and how they can work together to advocate for their rights, the Adolescents took turns to ask questions of the panel members around the gaps they have observed in the existing systems and the urgency for a shift in approach. Engaging directly with the Panelists, the girls and boys became more confident and capable of taking the lead without any support from GFC or our community partners.

Equipped with the knowledge to successfully advocate at various levels, the Adolescents spent the rest of the day producing their Calls to Action, focusing on specific, concrete demands that they wanted to see each of the stakeholders respond to and then act on:

- **Call to Action from their peers** – for example “We should be one another’s advocate”, “We should speak out and report any violence”, “Boys should support girls in their choice of career”
- **Call to Action from their parents and communities** – for example “Parents should not force girls and boys into traditional practices harmful to their health”, “Community leaders should actively encourage gender equality”
- **Call to Action from school leaders** – for example “Teachers should not remove girls from school because they are pregnant”, “They should ensure equal balance of male and female teachers in all schools”, “They should stop sex for grades”
- **Call to Action from civil society organizations (CSOs)** – for example “CSOs should include adolescents with disabilities in all decision making processes”, “CSOs should not be limited to cities but work in the most rural areas”
- **Call to Action from Government** – for example “Government should mandate the inclusion of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in all school curricula”, “Government should immediately implement laws forbidding female genital cutting/mutilations (FGC/M) in Liberia and Sierra Leone”, “Government agencies should ensure that laws around SGBV are properly enforced”
- **Call to Action from INGOs** – for example “INGOs should provide funding to strengthen CSO capacity to advocate for children’s rights”, “INGOs should work with government to provide sanitary pads for free or at an affordable cost”
- **Call to Action from ECOWAS & AU** – for example “ECOWAS & AU should demand national governments to enforce child protection laws”, “ECOWAS & AU should require all member countries to bring in laws that criminalize FGC/M”

Friday – In the months running up to the start of the Summit, the girls and boys engaged in the planning committee were determined to have representation from high level politicians. Whilst she was unable to attend the formal Duty Bearer sessions on the Thursday (as she was out of the country engaging with government partners in Malawi & Kenya) the Vice President of Liberia, Jewel Howard Taylor, travelled to the Summit on Friday morning to hear directly from the adolescents and respond to the Calls to Action that they had all been working on.

In front of the Vice President, the girls and boys shared the microphone, and one-by-one presented a clear outline of how gender inequities within the education system, harmful traditional practices, and a lack of affordable healthcare was limiting the potential of girls in Liberia and throughout West Africa.

The adolescents presented a range of solutions and next steps. The Vice President, after listening closely to each of the adolescents, then responded to each of their demands. She agreed to take their Call to Action to the Liberian parliament, engage with the First Lady of Sierra Leone, and explore avenues into both ECOWAS and the AU to ensure that the impact of the Adolescent Girls Summit was felt far beyond the borders of Liberia.

Next Steps

On the Monday immediately following the Summit, the Vice President of Liberia contacted the GFC team to request a meeting and explore in more detail how she could support the adolescents who so impressed her at the Summit. On Tuesday the GFC team travelled to the Vice President's office where she shared that she was touched by everything the girls and boys had said, and that their Calls to Action had continued to ring in her ears when she returned home.

She has committed to work with GFC, their community partners, and all of the adolescents to draft an action plan outlining the short- and long-term actions that she will then provide leadership on. She is working with her team to explore how best to engage the First Lady of Sierra Leone and other senior officials from both ECOWAS and AU.

The adolescents are more determined than ever to present their Calls to Action to their parents, community and school leaders, ministers in their home countries, at the regional level to ECOWAS, and at the continental level to representatives from the AU - and after that *worldwide!* They have set up a WhatsApp group to continue to work together as a collective and are focusing on the issues affecting Adolescents throughout Africa. With the 4th African Union Girls' Summit scheduled to take place next year in Mauritania, and plans emerging for the 2nd AGS in Sierra Leone in 2024:

Now is the time to invest in Adolescent-led Advocacy in Africa!





“I feel excited because there wasn’t an event where they involved adolescents — asking them what they face and what are the challenges that they are going through”

- Michaela, 14, Sierra Leone

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