



Gender justice

Empowering communities to lead their own development: A pathway to sustainable change in Africa

March 04, 2025
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Global Fund for Children (GFC), with support from the TIDES Foundation and People's Postcard Lottery, is implementing in a groundbreaking initiative in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Using GFC's flexible funding model, community-based organizations are supported to decrease incidents of gender-based violence and improve educational access for girls in the region.

The Initiative

Over the past five years, GFC has supported innovative, comprehensive, girl-centered, and community-driven initiatives in West Africa. Our support has not only responded to the immediate needs of adolescent girls but also educated them on their rights, helping to build their self-confidence and empowering them to defend their rights.

In addition, the community led approach employed by our grassroots partners in rural communities where harmful practices are prevalent has contributed to creating supportive ecosystems for girls' and women's rights and wellbeing. Respectful and inclusive engagements with community and religious leaders, teachers, women, children, youth, government institutions, and other key stakeholders have been central to shifting longstanding cultural norms and mindsets, ultimately promoting the well-being of girls and women. Communities themselves have reported a reduction in gender-based violence and an increase in investment in girls' education, marking significant progress in areas where our partners are active. This report provides an overview of those successes.



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Community-led Results

GFC integrated TOSTAN's Community Led Approach (CLA) into the program in close collaboration with TOSTAN and their context-specific methodology. Tostan is an African-based organization focused on empowering rural and remote communities in Africa to achieve positive social transformation and sustainable development through holistic education programs. GFC sponsored community leaders to attend training led by TOSTAN and then accompanied the partners as they returned to their communities to implement what they'd learned. Following the TOSTAN model, partners assisted rural communities in forming Community Management Committees (CMCs), consisting of representatives from various sectors—women, men, youth, religious leaders, and local leaders to drive inclusive and collective community development. The following communities participated in these activities:

Participating communities: Tostan's approach addresses systemic challenges from within local communities themselves. The six participating communities were:

- Waima community, Bo District, Sierra Leone
- Komende community, Bo district, Sierra Leone
- Nyengbema community, Bo district, Sierra Leone
- Kokofele community, Bo District, Sierra Leone
- Borbu community, Kenema district, Sierra Leone
- Sappiemah community, Gbarpolu county, Liberia

Areas of significant progress: With mentoring support from GFC, the seminar participants shared the CLA approach with their communities. This initiative has delivered transformative results in many important ways:

- increasing community unity,
- transforming perceptions of gender roles,
- encouraging women's participation in leadership roles,
- reducing gender-based violence and teen pregnancies,
- expanding local educational opportunities, and
- fostering ongoing community development.

The following summary showcases the tremendous successes of this initiative.



Participants at the Adolescents Girls Summit in West Africa. © GFC

Six Groundbreaking Successes

1. Fostering Unity and Inclusive Decision-Making

The initiative unified the communities and encouraged shared responsibility among its members.

By involving everyone in community decisions, women and children, who had previously been left out, were included in setting and achieving common goals. This made the community stronger and led to choices that reflected everyone's needs and wishes.

Key Successes:

- Women in the Waima community in Sierra Leone had been excluded from community decisions and even forbidden from entering certain locations, but after the CLA, they were treated equally.
- In the Kokofele community, women were consulted to make decisions, and men were no longer the sole decision-makers.

2. Profoundly Shifting Men's Attitudes Towards Women and Girls

The initiative has led to a significant change in how men view women and girls. By discussing gender roles openly, men have recognized their role as equal partners in caregiving and household tasks, allowing women and girls the time to pursue life-changing opportunities such as continued education.

Key Successes:

- Boys in the Kokofele community now participate in all household chores, regardless of whether they used to be "only for girls."
- The Borbu community in Sierra Leone adopted the slogan "side by side" as men and women worked together as a team.

3. Increasing Women's Leadership Roles

The initiative helped women gain the confidence to offer their opinions and take on leadership roles in the community. It also shifted men's perspectives so that they supported women's involvement in community decisions.

In the past, because of a male-focused community culture, only men had taken on these leadership roles.

With women helping lead the communities forward, decisions reflect everyone's interests, not just men's.

Key Successes:

- In Borbu, a woman was elected as Ward Councilor for the first time.
- In Kokofele, a woman was chosen to serve as Town Chief for the first time.

4. Dramatically Reducing Gender-Based Violence and Teen Pregnancies

The initiative led to a dramatic drop in gender-based violence, especially in cases of Female Genital Cutting (FGC) and forced child marriages. The training workshops conducted by GFC taught men and women how to solve conflicts peacefully and treat each other with respect. These workshops changed how people in the community thought about FGC and child marriages, helping to end these harmful practices, and allowing for more stable futures for girls and women.

The initiative also cut down teen pregnancies in the six targeted communities. "Teen Talk" programs helped families talk openly about sexual health and taught young people how to make smart choices about their bodies. This not only improved the health of young girls but also gave them more opportunities to stay in school and succeed in the future.

Key Successes:

- In Nyengbema, FGC was outlawed.
- Secret societies that encouraged violence towards women have been drastically curbed, and in some communities, even eliminated.
- Domestic violence and early childhood marriage in the communities have been sharply reduced.

5. Dramatically Increasing Funding for Education

The initiative greatly boosted investment in education for both boys and girls. Many communities built new schools and advocated for government support to expand and improve local educational programs.

Key Successes:

- The Kokofele community in Sierra Leone built a junior secondary school to eliminate the students' dangerous walk of several miles to and from school each day.
- Children from the Borbu community attained the highest grades within the district in national standardized exams.

6. Creating New Paths for Future Community Development

A key goal of the initiative was to create a local Community Management Committee in each community. The committees are made up of men and women chosen democratically by their peers.

The committees consider the viewpoints of all residents when determining the visions and priorities of the community. They govern sustainably and collaboratively, with the needs of the specific community always in mind.

Key Successes:

- The Committee in Borbu coordinated clearing their main road to allow for easier transportation to and from town.
- The Komende Committee built a general community meeting area to foster cooperation and unity.
- The Nyengbema and Kokofele Committees raised funds to build new schools.



Looking Ahead:

GFC's initiative in West Africa serves as a powerful example of how flexible investment in inclusive, community-driven development can transform communities.

From reducing gender-based violence, to empowering women and children, to providing broad educational opportunities, this initiative has made a profound and lasting impact in the lives of people living in the six targeted West African communities.

Continuing this groundbreaking work requires flexible long-term funding to provide for three key initiatives:

1. Strengthening Local Leadership

Strong local leadership organizations are vital to locally driven change and growth in each community. Strengthening these organizations will allow each community to decide its own path forward in a collaborative and sustainable manner.

2. Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation systems are crucial to the effectiveness of community-led initiatives. The impact of the CLA will be greatly maximized by creating a system to identify both successes and areas for improvement. This analysis will ensure the long-term sustainability of the successes already seen in the six participating communities.

3. Expanding Knowledge-Sharing and Collaborative Learning

Investing in a strong network of community-led organizations committed to mutual growth will ensure that the CLA evolves in ways that will serve the unique needs of each community.

Continued and Sustained Investment

The successes of the CLA in Sierra Leone and Liberia underscore the transformative potential of GFC's flexible funding model when paired with a community-driven approach.

Sustained investment will preserve the groundbreaking successes of the CLA in the areas of gender equality, education, and leadership far into the future. With further funding, this initiative will continue to drastically improve the lives of people living in these West African communities by:

- increasing community unity,
- transforming perceptions of gender roles,
- encouraging women's participation in leadership roles,
- reducing gender-based violence and teen pregnancies,
- expanding local educational opportunities, and
- fostering ongoing community development.

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