



WHAT WORKS TO EMPOWER GIRLS AND FOSTER GENDER EQUALITY IN REFUGEE CAMPS

Case study

Promoting girls' leadership, economic empowerment and protection: Insights from Plan International's *Empowering Girls for Equality* project in Rwanda

Rwanda is home to about 138,000 refugees, coming from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (56%) and Burundi (44%). As of February 2021, half of the refugees and asylum seekers population were children under 17 years of age. Three refugees in four are women and children. The majority of the 77,650 Congolese refugees are living in five camps (Gihembe, Kigeme, Kiziba, Mugombwa and Nyabiheke).

The Government of Rwanda upholds **refugee protection services** and **continued efforts to eliminate gender disparities**ⁱ. There is a de facto right to work, open borders, and access to durable solutions (resettlement, local integration and return) is unhindered. The refugee response is based on a comprehensive approach to solutions, including socio-economic integration, highlighting that refugees can contribute to the local economy, as well as complementary pathways and resettlement.

However, despite a strong legal framework and overall protective environment, and because of specific needs and vulnerabilities of refugee populations, refugee children and adolescents are exposed to a wide range of risks regarding protection from violence, abuse and neglect: family separation, physical violence and human rights violations, including sexual abuse and exploitation^{ii,iii}.

Plan International Rwanda commenced its refugee response in 2014 in all refugee camps addressing child protection and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) needs for both the Congolese and Burundian refugee populations as UNHCR Implementing Partner for both sectors, and as a lead stakeholder in food security response as a WFP Implementing Partner. In addition, Plan Rwanda is implementing humanitarian and nexus-oriented programmes in the fields of child protection in emergencies, SGBV, early childhood development and livelihoods.

Adolescent girls and young women at risk of violence express their needs

In Rwanda refugee camps, based on most recent protection needs assessments^{iv}, protection challenges are varying significantly with age and gender. **Sexual exploitation and abuse, domestic violence and IPV, early pregnancies, harassment and discrimination** are substantially more concerning girls aged 13+. In refugee settings, **harassment and discrimination in access to services** is a particularly notable topic mentioned by adolescent girls aged 13+. Variation in the specific protection concerns are deeply linked with the specific conditions adolescent girls thrive in, and the norms, roles and expectations associated with age and gender.

The **factors for such high levels of gender-based violence and discrimination are multiple and reinforce each other**. Pre-existing gender inequalities, which are structurally rooted both in communities of origin and in camps, perpetrate discrimination and exacerbate these inequalities in refugee camps; additional factors such as poverty, lack of livelihoods, but also limited girls' agency, skills and capacities due to interrupted education, are reinforcing vulnerabilities of girls and push households to adopt negative coping mechanisms

Risks factors associated with intimate partner violence are currently under reported; this is due to **attitudes and behaviours that represent a barrier to reporting** – culture of silence, beliefs about intimate partner violence, that are seen as “normal” family matters, and fear of being exposed to the community contribute to impunity and further protection issues.

Late reporting, due to **unavailability of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) services** or **lack of knowledge about such services**, for girls who are survivors of SGBV, results in unwanted pregnancies, STDs, and indirectly school dropout, punishment,

Globally, girls, adolescent girls and young women who are on the move, living in refugee or displacement settings, have specific needs, experience specific violations of their rights and face specific vulnerabilities and risks. Experiences of community stigmatization, sexual violence including rape and the transmission of STIs such as HIV/AIDS, early, forced and child marriage, sexual exploitation, limited access to educational and livelihood opportunities, are examples of the multiple and intertwined risks they experience.

rejection and stigmatization by families and communities that put them at further risk of being exposed to negative coping mechanisms such as sexual exploitation.

Yet, girls are fully able to identify and voice the services they need to access and the various factors that would make them thrive. In the baseline report of the *Empowering Girls for Equality* programme, girls of all ages expressed the desire to gain life skills through mentor engagement, education on SRHR and to be part of savings groups. The prevailing theme was the continued vulnerability of girls to exploitation due to lack of financial security within the family.

Lack of opportunity and financial security are additional risk factors of sexual exploitation. Due to misinformation regarding SRHR, as well as lack of understanding of gender equality and GBV, girls were overwhelmingly impacted by early pregnancy, engaging in risky sexual behaviours, and violence in general.

Empowering girls for equality, a holistic approach to social and economic empowerment

Empowering Girls for Equality (EGE): Building Assets of Adolescent Girls in Refugee Camps in Rwanda was a 30-month project implemented by Plan International Rwanda, from June 2018 to December 2020, with support from **Plan International Belgium** and **Plan International Hong Kong** in two Congolese refugee camps, Gihembe and Nyabiheke.

The overall goal of the project was to **empower and build the resilience and agency of girls by developing their social, personal, and material assets, while ensuring the active engagement of boys, men and all community members, to reduce the risk of violence, neglect, exploitation and abuse faced by adolescent girls.** This project builds on the successes of the *Girls Take the Lead* project (May 2015–October 2017), funded by the Nike Foundation and implemented by Plan International Rwanda, with the support from Plan International USA, in the same two refugee camps of Gihembe and Nyabiheke.

Success factors and promising strategies to empower girls and young women

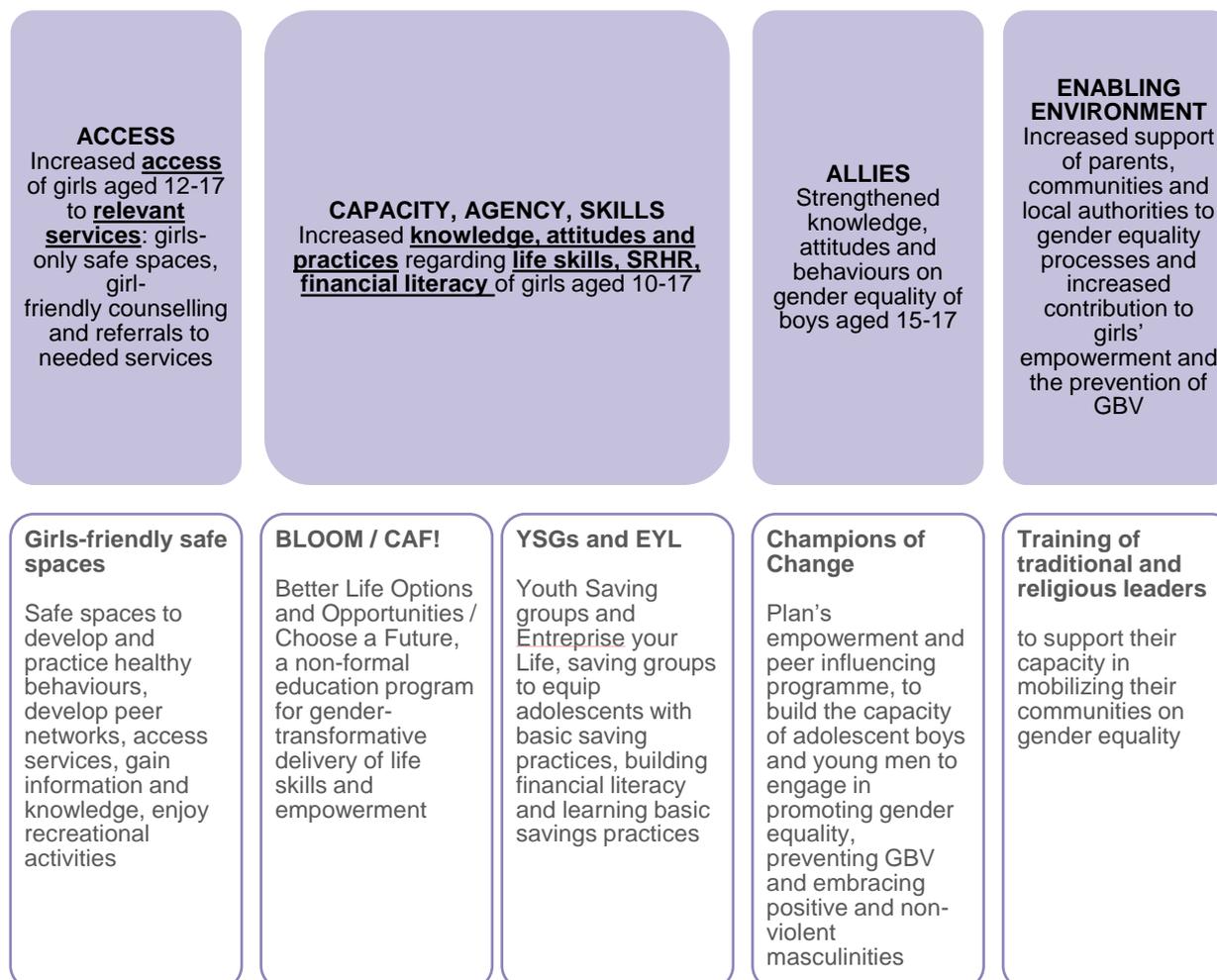
At the end of the project, parties involved agreed that, since the start of the project in 2018, there had been a community-wide shift in mindset towards acknowledging that girls must be protected from violence.

Increased access to safe spaces and girls-friendly counselling is an efficient age and gender-responsive response to the lack of information and knowledge about girls' rights, GBV, protection, SRHR, leadership

Adolescents and youth-targeted reported an **increased understanding of GBV issues and referral structures** thanks to information shared during safe spaces and girls-friendly activities, including counsel. The attention to the specific needs and capacities of adolescent girls and young women made possible to plan and adapt for gender-responsive activities. Deliberate consideration of attitudes, beliefs, power relations, gender norms at stake, can ensure long term effect on gender equality.

On the contrary, not considering the specificity of their needs, constraints and risks, results in developing gender-neutral activities that fail to serve those who need the services the most, and abide by the power relations and structures already in place. At the end of the project, girls interviewed reported to be aware and understand services and support system available to them. Referrals to counseling services and girl-friendly psychosocial support were evaluated as positive by the participants.

Theory of Change: EMPOWER AND BUILD THE RESILIENCE AND AGENCY OF GIRLS



Case management and PSS activities have been strategic to ensure that SRHR messages were also channeled to girls and their families. In fact, during the focus group discussions, girls associated their increased knowledge on SRHR to a positive change in behavior. Girls reported an increased learning on SRHR issues, particularly in relation to early pregnancy unsafe sexual practices.

The availability of a one-stop space, offering referral and services, targeted to address girls' needs, made it possible for girls to access quality psychosocial support and information about support services.

100% of the adolescent girls who received support in safe spaces reported they felt listened to, acknowledged and heard. They felt comfortable accessing this support for all matters, including for GBV-related issues. They have higher levels of knowledge about SRHR, and feel confident that overall the harmful and risk behaviours can decrease in their communities.

The project evaluation showed that using safe spaces as a one-stop center for trainings, non-formal education, PSS and recreational activities, was a success factors in engaging girls and young women. Nevertheless, girls reported to be less engaged in recreational activities due to social norms and lack of support from their parents in attending those sessions

The integrated approach, across SRHR, youth economic empowerment and protection from violence, is crucial to empower girls to be protected, thrive and claim their rights

The project was reported to be effective in enhancing girls' understanding of SRHR. Girls expressed how their participation in the BLOOM/CAF! Curriculum, Plan's comprehensive programme to build skills in a gender-transformative way, helped them with personal development such as **building self-esteem and confidence as well as acceptance of themselves and others**. Caregivers shared that the programme has strengthened adolescents peer relationships. Adolescent girls reported that their mentors had been key to learn about SRHR, gender equality, savings. Further they shared that mentors had supported in accessing resources creating a **welcoming, non-judgmental and compassionate environment where girls feel listened**.

Relying on a variety of strategies also participated in making the programme more continuous through the COVID-19 outbreak – while some core activities dependent on physical gathering and physical presence had to be put on hold, sensitization, information delivery, could go on and keep adolescents and youth involved.

Savings groups developed a culture of savings, provided a space for information sharing and promotion of gender equality, as well as improved the ability of adolescents to meet their needs, hence decreasing the risk of adopting negative coping strategies

81 women and 54 men mentors were trained on Plan's *Youth Savings Group* and *Enterprise Your Life* models to promote economic empowerment, to equip 955 adolescents – 728 girls and 227 boys – to develop savings practices, financial literacy, and basic entrepreneurship skills. 41 savings groups in Gihembe and Nyabiheke managed to save more than 8 million RWF, that is about 7,000€, during the implementation of the project.

All girls interviewed were able to **identify that access to money and savings capacity, all along with empowerment sessions, contributed to decreasing adoption of risky behaviours, including sexual risky behaviours, and negative coping mechanisms**. Specifically, on awareness raising sessions, girls acknowledged that their self-confidence and sense of empowerment increased considerably. The majority of girls reported that they will continue to participate in the savings groups.

The close follow-up of adolescents and youth by mentors, and the overall approach targeting skills and capacities, were key success factors to ensure that the youth saving groups continues after the project ended.

Saving groups are made sustainable by being part of a broader youth economic empowerment activities. The savings program was reported to be the most sustainable project component with mentors noting that they specifically wanted to continue their support of adolescents in this area as they see this as a great potential for change in adolescents. Mentors also expressed that the project would only succeed long term due to the efforts of camp and government leaders to ensure continued involvement of adolescents.

Actively engaging boys and young men in the path to gender equality is a promising strategy to ensure girls and young women find allies to foster gender equality

Boys and girls reported that they saw a **positive change in the attitudes of boys in the camps, as a result of the project**. Boys in both camps reported significant changes in their own behavior and attitudes around gender equality as a result of their participation in the *Champions of Change* model. Boys reported that they were now supporting their sisters and parents with traditionally gendered housework, including cleaning, cooking and fetching water.

Additionally, adolescent boys reported to have an increased understanding of gender equality, they also reported a feeling of decreasing GBV issues, unwanted pregnancies and drug abuse in the camp.



All of the boys interviewed reported that their own behaviors attitudes and believes in gender equality, and those of their peers, changed as a result of the project. Other stakeholders reported that **boys played a large role in teaching their parents about how to balance gender roles and have their sons contributing to household chores**. Finally, boys reported that they are able to identify situations and types of violence and that they understand what their role is in preventing and reporting GBV.

Girls who participated in the project reported positive behavior change, in particular around equitable relationships between boys and girls and a decrease in pregnancies and sexual violence.

76% of the respondents reported that there was an equal sharing of responsibilities between both boys and girls in the household, thanks to the boys' attitude to accept and undertake more house-keeping responsibilities.

The sensitization strategy allowed for such a positive change in the attitudes and behaviours. Information, **key messages and sensitization about SRHR, GBV, gender equality, girls' rights**, were disseminated via two complementary channels, one being through the girls-only activities organized in the safe spaces, targeting adolescent girls and young women; and the other one being through mixed gender groups, that are the saving groups. As the savings groups represented a space to receive and share information with boys in the two camps, it was reported as effective in improving overall attitudes and in understanding gender equality.

Combining both targeting strategies – one focusing on girls only as final beneficiaries, and one focusing on mixed gender groups, targeting also boys as allies – is a promising approach to work on increased knowledge and increased attention to these subjects given by girls and boys.

Well trained, dedicated mentors built trustworthy relationships between Adolescents, youth; and with their parents and caregivers

The programme focused on providing relevant age and gender-responsive support to adolescents and youth, based on the findings of the baseline assessment. This pointed out that adolescents were only able to access mentors in a school-based setting and not within the camps. Plan developed the **mentoring support approach at community level**, to complement the support adolescents have at school. The community mentoring approach to adolescent resulted in having 100% of targeted adolescent positively supported by a mentor in the camp. Mentors were trained on positive **children and adolescent communication techniques with a special attention to children at risk** (dropouts, girls at risk of early pregnancy, UASC and adolescents). This ensured **comprehensive and meaningful support**, as well as ensuring that out-of-school adolescents, likely to be the most left-behind category, could benefit from quality mentoring. Mentors reported that the intense training programme contributed to increased knowledge and shifting behaviors among mentors in positive ways.

Mentors' engagement with caregivers and parents was essential to encourage healthy relationships within families. Mentors insisted on the importance of promoting engagement with caregivers and parents along the project, to maximize the supportive and positive attitudes towards their work with adolescents and youth.

Regarding the profile of the mentors, the final evaluation recommended to reduce the age-gap between the mentor and the mentee. In future actions, mentors would be paired-up, associating younger and more experienced mentors. Mentors identified that complex situations were managed through same-sex mentorship-mentee approach.

Engaging with community members went beyond enabling environment, it initiated positive change, made girls feel safer and contributed to healthy family relationships

The programme put a strong emphasis on engaging with communities at large via sensitizations, awareness-raising sessions and training session with traditional and religious leaders. Working with community-structures **promote a protective environment, it contributes to actively involve parents, caregivers and community members to reinforce messages on gender equality, girls' rights, GBV prevention. Awareness on gender equality, and its cascade during community meetings, it was reported by community leaders to be having a significant impact in the reduction of GBV issues in the camps.** Women leaders were also strongly involved. These trained leaders were responsible for the implementation of the refugee leaders' action plans aiming at promoting a shift in gender equality in their communities.

At the end of the awareness cycle, girls reported an **increased sense of confidence** that those around them will take their rights seriously and stand up to prevent GBV and support gender equality. At the end of the project **94% of the girls reported an increased sense of safety.**

Participation and engagement with parents, caregivers, community leaders, adolescent boys and girls were carried out through **various platforms. Those were reported to increase the engagement of parents and caregivers into the project.** These platforms included the celebration of *Parent Evenings*, weekly in each camp; community meetings, home visits; and the use of megaphones to sensitise broader public on issues of child protection, promote positive masculinities, gender equality, and the prevention of gender-based violence.

Such activities managed to target more than 23,000 people over the 18 months of the action. More specifically, parents and caregivers reported that home visits, meetings and public theater were the most effective ways the *Empowering Girls for Equality* Project mentors used to interact with them.



Both boys and girls also reported that sensitization by mentors at the Parents Evening forums had contributed to reduced domestic violence by fathers.

When it comes to home visits, 87% of parents reported to be especially effective because of their frequency, privacy and the ability for the mentor to assess what was happening for the entire family unit. Due to COVID-19 and the inability for larger gatherings, home visits were heavily impacted.

The role of mentors was also praised by the parents and caregivers themselves, particularly on face-to-face sessions This has allowed discussions to be more in-depth, ask question and provision of tailored support. The trust between parents, caregivers and mentors proved to be one of the key success factors towards a durable support to adolescents.

After the end of the project, **parents and caregivers** from both camps stated that they had felt **comfortable calling their child's mentors** to report concerns of violence in their community, suggesting an increased level of knowledge and information regarding protective factors in place, or **to ask questions on how to communicate with their child about difficult topics.**

Increasing the quality of SGBV response relies on a comprehensive approach, tackling all stakeholders and creating a positive environment for girls

Along the cycle of the project, mentors stated that **GBV referrals increased since the start of the project**; such a trend is not unusual when quality programming tackling GBV is implemented. During the project, as knowledge of services, referral process including safe referrals become clearer, and cultural norms or barriers at stake were questioned through sensitization, and as there has been an increased confidence across the community in making referrals due to the training that Plan International Rwanda provided, GBV referrals increased and so could the response to cases. Two main success factors contributed to a higher resort to referral pathway and services.

A key factor has been the **community-wide shift in mindset towards acknowledging that girls must be protected from violence**. Girls reported having an increased sense of confidence that those around them will support them in claiming their rights seriously, will stand up to prevent GBV and support gender equality. Mentors also noted that there is a greater recognition of the various types of violence that girls experience, resulting in an increase in the ability of the community to support girls at risk of violence. New protocols in reporting, such as hotlines, helped facilitate their work to increase community reporting of GBV.

Second, for the referral pathway to be relied on, accessible and activated, a number of specific attentions to its implementation have been set-up, to ensure appropriate reporting of SGBV to the most suitable service. On the one hand, **stakeholders have been trained specifically on confidentiality**, to ensure that trust was built between girls, young women, and the mechanisms at stake. On the other hand, the **referral system that was put in place was built on careful collaboration between key stakeholders** – Camp Leadership, Plan Rwanda, MINEMA and UNHCR – to ensure that everyone was aware of communication and reporting protocols for suspected GBV cases. This was a prerequisite to ensure quality services provided, comprehensive pathways from referral to counter-referral, as well as providing relevant and appropriate services to survivors of SGBV.

COVID-19 disrupted the environment in which Plan Rwanda operates, but successful strategies managed to maintain the involvement of girls and young women

COVID-19 has disrupted the environment in which children grow and develop, hence, exposing them to further protection risks, particularly girls. Overall, the outbreak of the pandemic jeopardized progress made in the promotion of gender equality, via increased girl's equitable access to information and services and community-level sensitizations, while risks increased and put girls in a position of vulnerability. Women and girls **already in abusive situation, including intimate partner violence, were exposed to higher risks**. Health services were not closed as they were considered as essential services, but **the accessibility of SRHR services reportedly decreased**. Safe spaces were not accessible any more, hence hindering girls' access to counselling services and support to prevent early pregnancy or psychosocial isolation. Community awareness and reach out activities were suspended, making it **difficult to reach out to the community at large to encourage social behaviour change**. Recreational activities were also cut back or cancelled entirely. Furthermore, the limitation of door to door visits to the most vulnerable groups hindered support to parents and caregivers experiencing stress and searching for ways to cope with the crisis situation.

In order to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the activities, Plan decided to maintain its operations by **first adopting alternative ways of reaching the outcomes**. **Child helplines** were established to rapidly identify and address child protection issues (five toll-free lines in the targeted camps) and ensure children and adolescent-friendly access to reporting mechanisms. The teams were also supported to adapt ongoing activities: mentors based in camps, in collaboration with child protection community mobilizers, workers from the partner organisation ALIGHT and camp management teams, continued to **carry out sensitizations for the entire community using megaphones**.

Second, Plan also adjusted its programme to integrate COVID-19 responsive programme. Mentors delivered messages on prevention of COVID-19, on top of messages already delivered regarding SGBV and early pregnancies. This strategy was efficient in delivering messages related to lockdown, WASH practices, while keeping a strong link with children and adolescents and maintain a link with the referral pathway.

Mentors also shaped messages to prevent increased domestic chores burden: they encouraged family members to support each other, share domestic work, encouraging specifically adolescent boys to participate actively. In addition, adolescent and children, girls in particular, were sensitized to stay home and continue study courses delivered via different radios in Rwanda, whilst parents were encouraged to support their children in this effort. A share of the project budget was repurposed to support the project

beneficiaries in the response to COVID-19 with the provision of prevention goods: face masks, hand sanitizers, Menstrual Hygienic Management (MHM) kits, to ensure that the WASH response was adapted to address the needs of adolescent girls and young women. MHM kits were composed of buckets, soap, sanitary pads, which were distributed to 878 adolescents.

OPERATIONAL LESSONS LEARNT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMMING

Aligning with key recommendations from the Global Compact on Refugees, with needs within **host communities**, it is recommended by the final evaluation lessons to expand the intervention in host communities, particularly in creating and promoting networks, peer-to-peer influencing, support to community schools and health centres to integrate gender equality, SGBV, SRHR messages.

Expansion of the **number of safe spaces** is a recommendation of the project evaluation as well, while designing strategies to promote the inclusion of children, adolescents and youth with disability. In addition, the evaluation provided recommendations towards a more detailed and precise schedule, so that more slots are allocated to age and gender specific groups – girls, adolescent girls, child mothers, adolescent mothers.

The length of the programmes should also be adapted to be a **nexus programme** with a longer time scope, to ensure that an impact on social and gender norms is reached, in order to assess long-term decrease in harmful practices. Initially, the two-year programme scope did not ensure such a long-term impact; in addition, exit strategy including resilience, engagement with local authorities, influencing and advocacy, support to community-led interventions, need to be planned ahead of the project implementation for durability and impact purpose. This is the case for the management of safe spaces for instance.

Finally, in terms of **financial and economic sustainability**, a promising programmatic add-on to the programme would be the inclusion of strategies to provide some monetary incentives to encourage mentors' longer-term participation.

Programme model: 5 efficient and complementary strategy to achieve impact for adolescent girls and young women

Youth Savings Groups (YSGs) and Enterprise Your Life (EYL): The YSG and EYL are Plan's tested models to support youth economic empowerment. Savings groups are established to equip adolescents with basic savings practices, build financial literacy and learn basic entrepreneurship practices through the EYL curriculum. Adolescents and youth in groups also have a forum to discuss subjects that matter to them. These groups are mixed gendered and constitute a channel used by mentors to reinforce gender equality messages.

Girls-friendly safe spaces: Safe spaces are locations in the camps that are accessible and designated as girl-only spaces at specific days and time that offer a safe place for girls to develop and practice healthy behaviors; develop peer networks and participate in education and youth economic empowerment programmes. It is also an entry point to access services, including counselling and referral services or report cases of SGBV and other forms of violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation. During the project, safe spaces were also used for recreational activities based on the interests of the girls, including sports activities (such as football), traditional dancing and other social activities to develop life skills – self-esteem, self-efficacy, team-playing, negotiation. Sports and games were also intended to promote behaviors and attitude change, as a way to welcome community members to engage with gender-transformative activities. The project supported the four existing safe spaces and contributed to the construction or rehabilitation of two additional safe spaces, one in each camp.

Training of traditional leaders: In addition to boys' mentors and male youth, the EGE project included training of traditional and religious leaders, to support their capacity to mobilize their communities on gender equality.

Involvement of parents and caregivers: The project engaged parents and caregivers through mentors at camp-level, who visited regularly families; through the *Parent Evenings*, forums commonly organised in both refugee camps and host communities in Rwanda, during which caregivers discuss issues related to the education of children.

Better Life Options and Opportunities Model (BLOOM): Choose a Future! (CAF!): The BLOOM Model is a non-formal education program developed in 1987; it is an effective model for gender-transformative life skills and empowerment programmes targeting adolescents, especially in refugee camps. The BLOOM approach utilizes the CAF! life skills curriculum which includes 15 modules exploring topics around goal setting, confidence building, creation of the social capital, rights and responsibilities, SRHR knowledge.

Champions of Change (CoC) Approach: The Champions of Change (CoC) approach builds the capacity of adolescents and youth, to become peer influencers in order to shift gender norms and practices, and engage men and boys as allies in preventing GBV, promoting healthy relationships between boys and girls, gender equality and support to girls and young women. The program includes modules on being sexually responsible, non-violence in personal relationships.

Cover picture: Plan International, 2017. Participants to girls-only safe space activities, from the Girls Take the Lead programme in two refugee camps, Gihembe and Nyabiheke.

Picture 3: Plan International, 2017. Girls take part in savings group meeting in Nyabiheke camp.

Picture 2: Plan International, 2017. Girls safe space mentor, counsels an adolescent beneficiary from the Girls Take the Lead Programme.

About Plan International

Plan International strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And girls are the most affected.

As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 75 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.

ⁱ Rwanda Country Refugee Response Plan 2019-2020, UNHCR

ⁱⁱ UNHCR inter-agency gender assessment of refugee camps in Rwanda consolidated report, 2016

ⁱⁱⁱ Protection Needs Assessment Report – Rwanda. Plan International, June 2021.

^{iv} Ibid