



Available online at www.mchandaids.org

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
of MCH and AIDS
ISSN 2161-864X (Online)
ISSN 2161-8674 (Print)
DOI: 10.21106/ijma.160

COMMENTARY

Improving Health, Social Welfare, and Human Development Through Women's Empowerment in Developing Countries: The 2016 Girl Up Leadership Summit, Washington, DC, USA

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations Foundation's Girl Up campaign, an initiative dedicated to promoting the health, education, and leadership of adolescent girls in developing communities around the world, hosted its annual Girl Up Leadership Summit in Washington, DC from July 11-13, 2016. The summit welcomed more than 275 girl empowerment and women empowerment proponents to take part in leadership training, listen to and learn from influential figures like United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Kate Gilmore and Treasurer of the United States Rosie Rios, as well as engage in an official lobby day in the nation's capital. Topics discussed at the summit ranged from the issue of child marriage and sexual and reproductive health rights to intersectional feminism and the importance of the next generation of global girl advocates. The purpose and, later on, achievement of the conference was the development of such leaders and Girl Up representatives. Summit attendee and Girl Up Campus Leader Janel Mendoza shares her experience as a longstanding Girl Up supporter and reflects on the preeminent conversations held during and following the summit.

Key words: United Nations • Girl Up Campaign • Adolescent Girls • Developing Countries

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1. Introduction

From July 11-13 2016, young female leaders and renowned human rights proponents from across the nation and around the world gathered in Washington, DC for the 5th annual Girl Up Leadership Summit.^[1] The leadership summit was hosted by the United Nations Foundation's Girl Up – a campaign whose mission is to advocate the health, education, and leadership of adolescent girls in the specific

developing countries of Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Liberia, Malawi, and Uganda.^[1]

Since its launch in 2010, the campaign has supported multiple United Nations programs geared toward advancing health and prosperity among women and girls. To ensure health education and health services, Girl Up has partnered with the United Nations to provide girls with resources such as information on nutrition, HIV prevention, and

sexual and reproductive health. Health services have included access to clean water and regular check-ups. Likewise, to ensure quality education, Girl Up has collaborated with the United Nations as well as local schools and organizations to provide girls with school materials, scholarships, and well-trained educators – allowing them to not only attend school but also encouraging them to succeed in school. On the whole, Girl Up has fostered leadership among girls by empowering them to engage in decision-making, work with other girls and community members, and hone the economic and social skills imperative to enacting change within and beyond the communities they come from. With all of this in mind, the Girl Up Leadership Summit marked the 5th year of Girl Up's efforts and subsequent successes. The Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington, DC, at which the summit was hosted, was accordingly filled with national and international Girl Up leaders and supporters eager to both recognize the previous year's wide-reaching achievements and to lay the groundwork for the upcoming year's even wider-reaching goals.

As one of two representatives from Wellesley College's Girl Up, I attended the leadership summit to learn more about Girl Up's continued relevance and to learn more about our role as female advocates in the process of its growth. From this point of view, I reflect on Girl Up and its global efforts, its leadership conference, and its uniqueness as a whole – a summit and a campaign that embodies the mission to be “by girls, for girls.”

1.1. Opening remarks from UN foundation and Girl Up Leaders

To begin, Day 1 of the Girl Up Leadership Summit consisted of opening remarks from the Director of Girl Up, Melissa H. Kilby, and the President and CEO of the United Nations Foundation, Kathy Calvin. The distinguished women welcomed students and leaders from across the United States and from around the world, and highlighted the importance of investing in women and girls. Calvin noted, “Some people say that it's the right thing to do,” and added, “but it's also the smart thing to do.” Both women then went on to introduce the overarching goal of

Day 1 – to address the motivation, or the “why” questions, behind Girl Up's work. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) data on human development and gender development served as the basis for dialogue.

1.2. Human development in Girl Up focus countries

The UNDP's Human Development Reports illustrate the annual expansion of human capabilities, or the lack thereof, in regions such as Girl Up's focus countries Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Liberia, Malawi, and Uganda with the use of indices such as the human development index (HDI), the gender development index (GDI), and their respective dimensions – health, education, and economic status. From a surface-level perspective, Girl Up's focus countries demonstrate progress in all dimensions.^[2,3] That is, on an aggregate scale from 0 to 1 – where 0 signifies minimum achievement in health, education, and income and 1 signifies maximum achievement – the focus countries have experienced numerical increase, and therefore significant improvement, over the last decade. For instance, following 2015, Liberia holds the lowest HDI score of the focus group (0.430), while Guatemala boasts the highest HDI score of the focus group (0.627) (Figure 1). Guatemala's aggregate score of 0.627 and India's aggregate score of 0.609 places the countries in the medium human development tier, apart from Girl Up's other focus countries (Ethiopia 0.442; Malawi 0.445; Uganda 0.483) that remain in the low human development tier. In Guatemala's particular case, its increased HDI score can be attributed to better economic status as a result of macroeconomic management and GDP growth, and better standard of living as a result of more democratic practices following Guatemala's longstanding civil war.^[4]

However, as noted by the late economist and human development theorist Mahbub ul Haq, economic growth alone does not ensure comprehensive development. Guatemala and Girl Up's other focus countries still necessitate development in some or all HDI dimensions.

With regard to Guatemala's human development status, leaving aside its reputation as Central

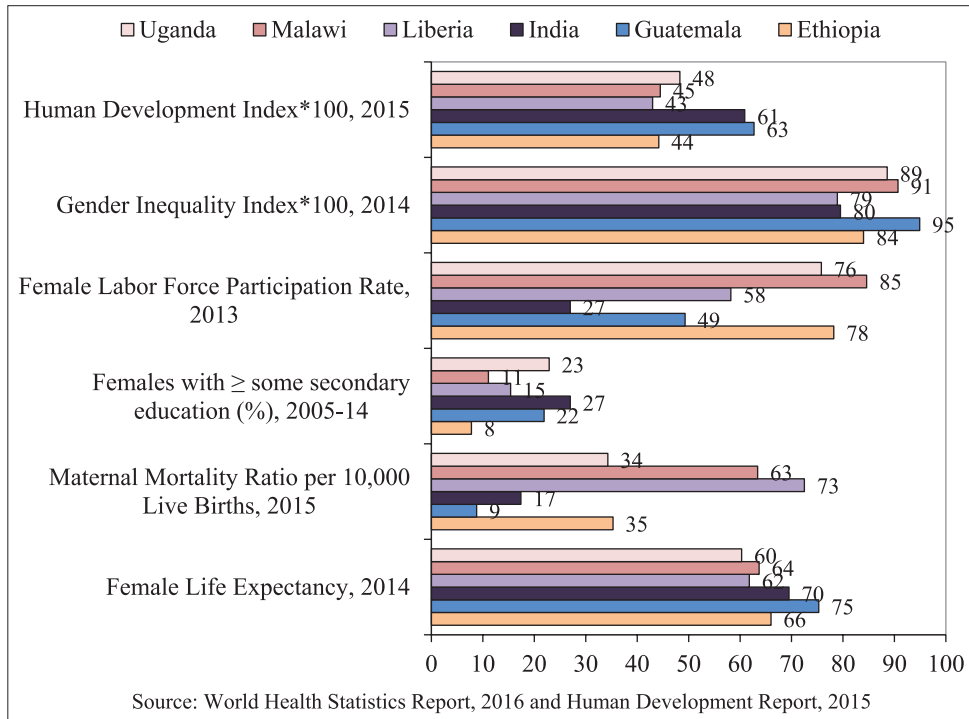


Figure 1: Women’s Health and Social Status:A Comparison of Six Developing Countries

America’s largest economy, the country maintains one of the highest inequality rates in Latin America. Guatemalans experience some of the worst cases of poverty, malnutrition, and maternal and child mortality rates, particularly in its rural and indigenous communities. Its conditions provide a glimpse of the issues that are prominent in Girl Up’s focus regions.^[2,3]

1.3. Gender disparities in Girl Up focus countries

To further complicate the narratives of Girl Up’s focus countries, gender disparities must be better accounted for, e.g., through the use of the GDI to show the gender gaps in human development achievements through the observation of inequalities between men and women in the three basic dimensions.

In Guatemala, where inequality and poverty are widespread, females in rural and indigenous areas are the most disadvantaged and vulnerable group. Likewise, in India, females often receive less health

care, education, and employment opportunities in contrast to males. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) State Programme Officer, Rajnish Ranjan Prasad, and UNFPA Peer Educator, Abhilasha Damor, discussed women’s health and women’s development during one of the Girl Up Leadership Summit workshops. In particular, the UNFPA representatives highlighted child marriage as a prevalent issue for women and girls in India and noted its negative effects on their subsequent health and maturation. Their presentation and workshop demonstrate the gravity of child marriage and how the practice actively hinders development.

Prasad noted that 29 percent of married women in India have children before the age of 18. In addition, 17 percent of married women from the ages 15-24 report that their most recent pregnancy was mistimed or unwanted.^[5] In this manner, child marriage violates human rights, reinforces gender inequality, and inhibits the achievement of sustainable development. Families who marry their daughters

to ensure their economic security or to ease their financial burden, in fact, allow the opposite to take place. The practice perpetuates a cycle of poverty. Unwarranted child marriages shorten girls' education, push them into unsafe and repeated pregnancies, and limit their future employment opportunities. Girl Up's support of initiatives such as those run by the UNFPA in the Rajasthan region therefore upholds an important role in the putting off of adolescent girls' marriages, the education on topic areas including maternal and child health, and the publicizing of communal services that are available to them.

1.4. Child marriage and maternal and child health in Girl Up countries

The campaign's commitment to core issues in Girl Up's focus countries, like the issues of child marriage and maternal and child health in India and rural and indigenous inequality and poverty rates in Guatemala, contribute to the decline of human rights violations and to the growth of capabilities for women and girls in developing countries. Outside of its efforts in Guatemala and India, Girl Up equips communities in Ethiopia, Liberia, Malawi, and Uganda with the tools essential to quality girls' education and future labor force participation. Day 1 of the Girl Up Leadership Summit communicated these efforts and reinforced its mission to further global development giving specific attention to gender disparities. The goal of Day 2 would be to address the operation, or the "how" questions, behind Girl Up's work. That is, the remainder of the summit would be dedicated to mobilizing the next generation of Girl Up leaders and gender development advocates (Figure 2.)

1.5. International legislation supporting girls' empowerment

To continue, Day 2 of the Girl Up Leadership Summit consisted of workshops on mass fundraising, expanding Girl Up's presence from national to international platforms, and communicating with staff on Capitol Hill. United Nations Foundation Executive Director for Advocacy, Mike Beard, and Girl Up Senior Grassroots Officer, Julie Willig, led advocacy training to prepare summit attendees for the next lobby day. Talking points would include

the Girls Count Act – the law enacted in 2015 to ensure that adolescent girls in developing countries are provided birth certifications by their governments and are able to fully participate in their communities^[6] – and the Protecting Girls' Right to Education in Vulnerable Settings Act also known as the Education for Refugees Act – a bill proposed to prioritize education for girls in vulnerable settings as part of U.S. foreign policy. The summit attendees would go on to meet with their respective Members of Congress and promote the Protecting Girls' Right to Education in Vulnerable Settings Act on behalf of Girl Up and, even more so, on behalf of the millions of girls based in Girl Up's focus countries.

2. Conclusion

From revisiting the inspiration behind Girl Up's work to demanding tangible solutions from policymakers in the United States and abroad, the 2016 Girl Up Leadership Summit concluded with an empowered group of women and girls prepared to continue advocating for their fellow women and girls' health, education, economic opportunities, and thorough development. To this extent, the Girl Up campaign and its leadership summit fulfill the precept to be "for girls, by girls."

This year demonstrates a greater awareness of gender disparities in global development and, in the coming decade, Girl Up members and supporters anticipate an even greater integration of gender equality and women's empowerment

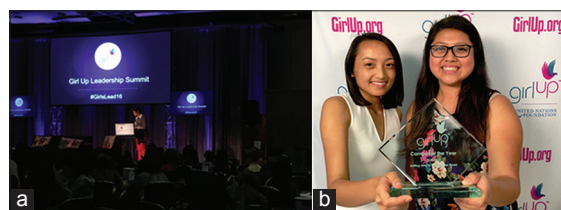


Figure 2: Photos from Girl Up Leadership Summit and Girl Up (<https://girlup.org/>). (a) UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Kate Gilmore, presents "My Hope for the Future" at the Summit, (b) Wellesley College Girl Up Campus Leaders Janel Mendoza (left) and Rocío Ortega (right) receive the award for "Campus of the Year"

into poverty reduction, democratic governance, and other aspects of sustainable development. After all, without question, there is no better approach to development and population health improvement than through the empowerment of women and girls.

Acknowledgements: *I would like to thank Dr. Gopal K. Singh of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for his guidance, mentorship, and comments on an earlier draft of this commentary.*

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