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GRL Power Case Study:

What can we learn about the experience of girl-led research in Jordan?



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Challenging the Norms

“Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.”¹

Three adolescent girls under the age of 19 discuss what makes a safe city for an adolescent girl in Jordan; one is an interviewer, another is a note-taker, and the third is an interviewee. This is what research days looked like in the girl research units (GRUs) of the three areas of Amman,



Girl Researchers' trainings

Balqa, and Madaba. A cohort of six girls in each area got together in February and March 2018 to collect qualitative data through in-person interviews with peer adolescent girls. Prior to that, the girl researchers received training on qualitative research skills by a trained mentor from their local community to form together a GRU and lead research in their area. Mona, a 19 year old girl researcher from Balqa, expressed that the experience of being part of a GRU that Girl Research and Learning Power (GRL Power) offered: **“[it] challenges the norms of what girls do and the stigma of “’aib” or shame.”**

GRL Power is one of the first adolescent girl-led research initiatives in Jordan and is funded under a USAID YouthPower Learning contract managed by Making Cents International. GRL Power was launched in October 2017 with the aim of putting adolescent girls in the lead

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (N.Y: Vintage, 1972), p. 161.

of the project as researchers. Mercy Corps' Regional Center for the Advancement of Adolescent Girls (the Center), in partnership with ActionAid Arab Regional Initiative (AA), facilitated the process by recognizing the girls as experts in their own wellbeing, and by providing them the space and platform to speak for themselves. Eighteen girl researchers conducted interviews with 75 peer adolescent girls to understand what makes a safe city for them, provide a new lens to Action Aid's 'Safe Cities for Women' project and support its effort to increase safety in public spaces in Jordan.

Presenting Absent Voices

“When an individual can name her circumstance, name her pain, name herself, she becomes an active agent in her world.”²

*** Why Girl-led Research?**

Prior to GRL Power, discussions with adolescent girls in the region by the Center and AA revealed the power dynamics that play a role in positioning the girls in society. The girls pointed out modes of control over their lives and bodies, starting from society's control of streets and in schools, to parental control and internalized self-control that the girls expressed through the rhetoric of victim



Girl Researchers conducting an interview

² Edited by Lauren Muller and the Poetry for the People collective; with an introduction by June Jordan. (1995). *June Jordan's Poetry for the People : a revolutionary blueprint*. New York :Routledge

blaming. As expressed by an adolescent girl, **“I don't feel free in anything, even in my choice of clothing, or even in my thoughts. I feel like my thoughts are being watched by my mother and brother”**.³

Practitioners working with adolescent girls sometimes fall into the same trap by imposing their preconceived ideas on what problems and solutions for adolescent girls look like. The girl researchers in the three areas were very excited to be part of this paradigm shifting experience, and were aware of the need for such projects. L'tidal, a 16 year old girl researcher from Amman, comments on the current situation faced by adolescent girls in her community by saying **“The voice of girls in our society is nearly absent”**. Girl-led research aims to amplify these voices and challenge the existing power dynamics by providing the girls with the platform to speak for themselves rather than having someone to speak on their behalf. Girl-led research resists power dynamics, and serves girls and practitioners working with them at multiple levels. It redefines dominant knowledge and sheds light on topics of girls' exclusion and silencing, by recognizing that no matter how much an outside researcher tries to understand girls' lives, the girl herself will always be the real representative of and expert on her own issues and lived reality. Further, girl-led research helps develop a sense of solidarity among the girls.⁴

Further, girls are aware of the intersectionality of issues of race, social status, gender, ability, refugee status and other factors that influence their health, rights and wellbeing.⁵ When girl researchers conduct the interviews and produce the knowledge, they own it. Salsabeel, GRL Power's youngest researcher, celebrated that thought at the end of

³ Mercy Corps Girl Center: Breaking Silence Report. April, 2017.

⁴ Biber, S. Leavy, P. (2007) *Feminist Research Practice*. USA: Sage Publications.

Chilisa, B. (2011) *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. USA: Sage Publications.

⁵ Ibid

the project saying **“The research became ours”**. A girl's ability to create knowledge and represent her own reality, and own it, boosts her confidence and awareness of herself and of her experiences. Girl interviewees may feel more comfortable and confident sharing their experiences and ideas with their peers rather than with adult researchers, which provides more nuanced data.

*The Question of Safety in Public Spaces

Prior to GRL Power, adolescent girls consulted by the Center in Jordan have expressed repeatedly that they do not feel safe in public spaces. A 13 year old adolescent girl describes girls' presence in public spaces, saying **“A girl walking on the street cannot guarantee herself safety”**.⁶ This echoes her peer adolescent girls concerns of being in a public space. AA's findings and efforts in its Safe Cities for Women campaign reflect the importance of this topic. GRL Power tackles the issue from a different angle by putting forward girls' efforts in exploring this topic and asking their own questions to their peers. Each of the three GRUs developed their own research question around the topic of safety in their area. Amman's GRU concentrated on “What is required to make adolescent girls feel safe on the street in their area?” while Madaba's GRU narrowed down its exploration to the question of “Reasons behind harassment in the city of Madaba”. Balqa on the other hand, was concerned with “How adolescent girls define their relationship with their city after the sun sets? Does it change? How and why?”

⁶ Mercy Corps Girl Center: Before She Left School Report. July, 2017.

Girl-led Research In Action!

“The most subversive thing a woman can do is talk about her life as if it really matters.”⁷

GRL Power is a journey that went through multiple stages. The journey of the 18 girl researchers started in January 2018, however, planning and building capacity to serve the GRUs started earlier in October 2017. The phases of this journey are as follows:

* Building Research Skills:

The Center developed a girl adolescent-friendly training guide to girl-led research, and parallel to it, a guide for mentors. The training guide incorporated and adapted aspects of Girl Effect's *Trainers' Handbook*⁸, as well as other global practical



guides on youth-led research. The training guide included guidance on qualitative research skills and incorporated different exercises to practice interviews as interviewees and as observers and note takers.

At the end of October 2017, three female research mentors were recruited from the local community, one from each of the three

⁷ Eltahawy, M. (2016). *Headscarves and Hymens*. Orion Publishing Group.

⁸ Girl Effect, (2016). *Trainers' Handbook: Tips and topics for equipping a GRU with qualitative research skills*

areas. The mentors are university graduates, with training experience. The three mentors were recruited through AA's local partners in the community. Having local mentors was essential to the success of GRL Power, as they played a huge role in communicating with community based organizations (CBOs) and in understanding the background of the researchers and the interviewees. For instance, the mentors were able to explain and simplify the topic of research by giving examples to the girls from their own community and day to day experiences.

The mentors attended a two-day training led by AA using the girl-led research guide developed by the Center. The three mentors expressed the uniqueness of the topic. Following the training of the mentors, Abeer, Balqa's research mentor, commented:

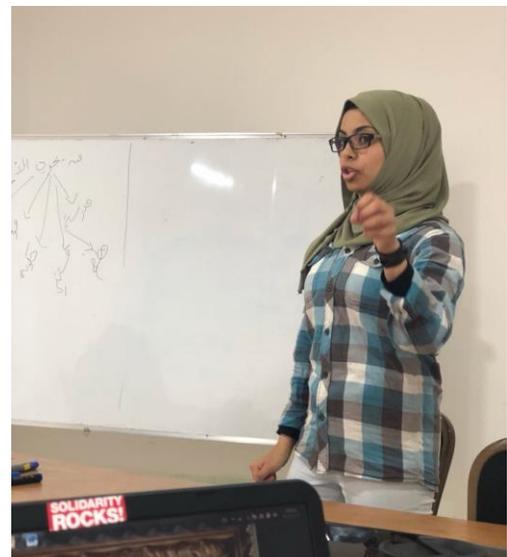
“This is the first time I facilitated training around research, I learned how to develop a research question and how to conduct research. I think this experience will allow us to dig deeper into information and problems that girls are facing”.

The recruitment and training of the girl researchers took place in their respective areas in January 2018. A diverse group of girls were chosen to take part in the GRUs. The girls are between the ages of 16 and 19 years old and are in- school and out-of-school girls and university students. The researchers were recruited through AA's partner CBOs, keeping in mind having a diverse cohort of girls to enrich the experience of both the researchers and the interviewees. The girls' parents trusted the CBOs we worked through, and this made it easier for us to engage the girls with the project. The research units include Jordanian, Palestinian, Iraqi and Egyptian girls. The girl researchers were trained by the mentors on qualitative research in a three-day training. Each GRU developed a series of

open ended interview questions to investigate the research questions they chose to explore. Several meetings between the mentors and researchers were held where they got together to follow up with the girls after the training, and decide on the next steps. Rula, a 16 year old researcher from Madaba, expressed her excitement after the training: **“I feel that I will do something that will benefit me personally, and it might also benefit the society, even if a bit”**.

* GRL Power in Numbers

The 18 girl researchers conducted their interviews during the months of February and March in CBOs located in their areas. Each GRU conducted the interviews over four research days, scheduled according to the girls' schedules. Across all three areas, 75 girls aged 13 to 19 years old were interviewed. The interviewees included 40 Jordanians, 20 Syrians, 7 Egyptians, 5 Palestinians, and 3 Pakistanis, and included in-school, out-of-school, married, un-married, mothers, literate and illiterate adolescent girls. The wide range of diversity among the interviewees allowed the girl researchers to have a rich experience and receive nuanced answers to their research questions. As Jeehan, a girl researcher from Balqa, comments on the experience: **“I got introduced to different problems, I learned you do not really know someone just because they are with you”**.



GRU mentor training girl researchers on

*Girl Researchers Leading Research

Each GRU had three teams of two, in which each girl researcher alternated her role between being an interviewer and a note taker. Using a research report to document the data collected, the note taker observed the interview, while the interviewer took the lead on asking the questions. At the end of each research day, the girls had debriefing sessions with their mentors. They discussed their findings and noted the overlaps and outstanding results. On their first day of research, the girls were nervous and needed support from their mentors. The mentors provided the needed support in the post-interviews debriefs. However, with experience, they gained more confidence and by the last day were able to conduct the interviews independently.

*Limitations

Despite the success of the girl researchers to gain the knowledge and develop research skills within the limited timeline they had, it should be noted that this is a small pilot. There are many lessons learned from the pilot, further explored in the accompanying "Guidance Note on Working with Girl Researchers," which details challenges and opportunities for repeating and scaling this effort.

Girl researchers' experience

The six girl researchers in each of the three areas worked together over the course of two months to conduct the interviews and reflect on the findings and on their experience. Following the interviews the girl researchers led was an in person event in their area to share the findings of the research and to celebrate the end of the project. Moreover, the girl researchers led an Arabic webinar addressing NGOs and practitioners to share their learnings and research findings. The effect of the experience on the adolescent girls was reflected in their feedback about the project. In their own words, the

girl researchers noted being positively affected in the following ways:

* Building their capacity as researchers

- The girls noted that this experience built their capacity in the field of research and taught them how to conduct interviews. Enas, a university student girl researcher from Balqa, commented on the skills she gained from the training and the experience saying that **“I got a full mark on my university course on research”**. The girls reflected on the improvement they have noticed themselves on their performance as researchers from the first day to the last day. **“On the first research day we were a bit anxious, and we kept the paper of questions with us, but today on the last day there was a flow in the interviews”**, (Mona, Balqa’s GRU).
- The girls noted that the experience has boosted their self-confidence and expanded their knowledge in the issues facing the girls. **“This experience boosted my self-confidence and was able to know how younger girls think and how girls my age think and how I can talk to them and discuss”**, (Amina, Amman’s GRU). The girl researchers mentioned being able to see themselves in a different light, as noted by one of the researchers, **“I learned to believe in myself”**, (Salsabeel, Balqa’s GRU).
- Girls in the three research units expressed how happy they were to spend their vacation being socially productive and engaged. **“We spent our vacation doing something useful”** (Yara, Amman’s GRU).

* Developing a sense of solidarity

- Through research, the girl researchers reflected a sense of empathy towards their peers, as Aroub from Madaba's GRU comments on her experience, **"When I was on the ground [in the interviews] with the girls I felt how much they would like to have a safe city"**. Moreover, the girl researchers reflected on their feeling of the sense of community, and a feeling of not being alone in what they are experiencing, **"I feel that the girls have the same problems as mine."** (Enas, Balqa's GRU).
- The girl researchers also reflected on learning not to make any judgments based on previous assumptions they had. **"I felt that I changed a lot, I got introduced to different problems. I learned you don't really know someone just because they are with you"**. (Jeehan, Balqa's GRU). Another girl researcher reflects this idea saying **"I used to think that I, on my own, am afraid of guys and of darkness. It turned out that there are other girls like me. I am not strange or weird!"** (Enas, Balqa's GRU).

Research Findings

Each GRU in its respective area had its own unique findings depending on its research question. However, exploring the general topic of adolescent girls' safety in public spaces, the girl researchers in the three areas found that there is indeed a problem of safety that needs to be tackled and discussed. In Amman's GRU, the girl researchers' main finding as to what is required by adolescent girls to feel safe, was being accompanied by someone, or being in a public space where other people are present. As expressed by a 15 years old interviewee, **"I always feel scared when I am alone, but when anyone accompanies me, anyone, even if a young child, I feel safer"**. This feeling of fear was echoed by the findings of the

researchers in Balqa, especially after sunset: **“If my mother and family are not at home, I do not feel safe”**. Madaba’s GRU also explored the topic of safety by concentrating on the issue of harassment. When the researchers asked an interviewee to define a safe city, the 17 year old answered, **“A safe city is when I can go out at any time and feel safe without my family. There is no safe city”**.

*** Girl researchers sharing their findings:**

In GRL Power’s final month, Mercy Corps held three in-person events, one in each of the areas, and shared the research findings with the adolescent girl interviewees, CBOs and the local community. These events which



Amman’s GRU in- person event

were led by the adolescent girl researchers and the local mentors were welcomed and encouraged by the local community. The three events were held in public spaces in the community to resist the lack of mobility and public spaces that adolescent girls discussed in their research. The girl researchers shared the learnings and findings of their research, and celebrated their achievement being the first GRUs in Jordan. Families of the researchers, interviewees and CBOs were interested in knowing more about the research, and they all expressed their happiness in celebrating this in a public space.

Moreover, two [webinars](#) were held, one in Arabic and one in English targeting NGOs, UN agencies and adolescent girl practitioners. The Arabic webinar was led by the girl researchers and their mentors where they shared their experiences, research findings and their ideas of how they can help build on this project. The English webinar was led by representatives from Mercy Corps and ActionAid, sharing the lessons learnt from GRL Power and the girl researchers’ findings. Moving forward, Mercy Corps will be sharing GRL Power’s experience internally and externally through presenting the project in working group meetings, such as the Sexual and Gender Based

Violence working group and NLG group in Jordan. Mercy Corps and ActionAid are both part of these two groups which include a number of UN agencies and NGOs working in Jordan. In addition, Mercy Corps produced this case study and a guidance note on girl-led research. These two documents include an overview of GRL Power's phases, the girl researchers' experiences, lessons learned and strategies for working with girl researchers. Both will be disseminated and shared among CBOs, NGOs, UN agencies and practitioners working with adolescent girls to encourage them to engage youth in researching the topics that impact their lives.

What is Next?

“This research was one of the best experiences in my life, and I learned so much and changed my mind about a lot of topics”,
(Rula, Madaba's GRU).

GRL Power proved that adolescent girls can identify and articulate the challenges they face and the resources they need to live safe, dignified and empowered lives. They are uniquely positioned to retrieve information from their peers that adult researchers would not be able to obtain, which ultimately provides unique insights on their lived reality. The results of their research added more nuances to the knowledge-base on adolescent girls and demonstrated that young people can create knowledge and actively contribute to adult conversations on topics that impact their lives. GRL Power was a steady building block



Girl Researchers in an activity to brainstorm the research question

for girl-led research efforts in Jordan and in the region. The girl researchers expressed their interest in continuing the research, and in transforming the knowledge they gained during their research journey into action. As practitioners working with adolescent girls, the Center and AA appreciate the new lens added to their programming by the girl-led efforts. This is just the start of a longer journey that adolescent girls can and will lead as knowledge producers and guides of practitioners programming.