

To end gender-based violence we must listen to girls

Published on Pambazuka News (<https://www.pambazuka.org>)

[Faiza Jama Mohamed](#) [1]

Thursday, March 22, 2018 - 20:00



I am proud of those moments when I see girls who we have supported become leaders in the fight against the wrongs they face, shaking the ground to bring much needed changes not only to their own lives, but also to others who follow in their footsteps. New generations are benefiting from the silence that has been shattered and the advances achieved in securing justice.

Empowering girls with knowledge about their human rights and where to go when they need help is critical in breaking the cycle of gender-based violence and discrimination, as is giving them the opportunity to share their views and amplify their voices.

That is why in 2017, Equality Now launched the “25 Conversations in 25 Schools in Africa” initiative in which we visited secondary school in six African countries (The Gambia, Kenya, Mauritania, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Uganda) to speak to 2300 girls about their rights and to learn about their experiences.

Participants were invited to share anonymous questions, and their contributions raised a wide range of issues from child marriage and female genital mutilation, to rape and incest.

We shared our findings with national stakeholders and called upon them to act. We also amplified the voices of the girls at regional fora such as at meetings with the African Committee of Expert on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights, where we instigated discussions to increase understanding and highlight the obligations treaty monitoring bodies have in protecting and promoting girls’ rights.

To reach more girls with the type of information they crucially need, we produced a booklet for Kenya featuring the experiences of participants, details on what Kenyan law says about various violations, and what girls should do if they find themselves in similar situations including where to go for help. We are producing a similar booklet for Tanzania, and hope to do the same for the other countries.

Another tactic was to share the girls’ words on billboards around the streets of Nairobi, triggering much needed public discussion.

One of the lessons we gained from 25 Conversations in 25 Schools in Africa was that what started out as conversations with girls in schools ended up reminding us of the linkage between the work we do at policy level and the reality on the ground.

It clearly showed us the gaps that still exist and how girls continue to face complex obstacles when it comes to reporting rights violations even where laws do exist. It also highlighted the very sad reality

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that children are violated in circumstances where they should otherwise feel safe. Working in partnership is critical to addressing such huge problems and many stakeholders, both governmental and non-governmental, need to come together to protect girls from harm. In Kenya, Equality Now has a good variety of partners and we have been able to complement each other's strengths.

The whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts, with each of us contributing our unique expertise, resources and networks to achieve a wider reach, and wield greater influence on the state and important players such as parliamentarians and the media.

Unfortunately, many women today continue to face a plethora of inequalities and gender-based violence rooted in violations during childhoods. Girls subjected to sexual abuse are at greater risk of dropping out of education, unwanted pregnancy, early marriage and commercial sexual exploitation. If nothing is done to address the crimes committed against them, such traumatic experiences can blight their entire lives in myriad of ways, impacting not only on them but their families and the wider society.

In 2018, we still have much to do to create a world that treats women equally and where they feel safe and enabled to reach their full potential. The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals offer countries the opportunity to redress the inequalities women and girls face - including the removal or amendment of laws that discriminate against women and therefore deny them the same opportunities and protection that men enjoy and take for granted.

Countries also need to invest in eliminating sexual harassment from all public and private spaces, and facilitate women to take leadership positions at various levels of governance.

Together working in partnership - girls and boys, women and men, partner organisations, policy makers, politicians, the media - we can create a tidal wave of change that will finally turn gender equality from a dream to reality.

* Faiza Jama Mohamed is Africa Director for international women's rights organisation Equality Now and has extensive experience tackling gender based violence and inequality across the region.

* Equality Now is an international human rights organisation that works to protect and promote the rights of women and girls around the world by combining grassroots activism with international, regional and national legal advocacy. Our international network of lawyers, activists, and supporters achieve legal and systemic change by holding governments responsible for enacting and enforcing laws and policies that end legal inequality, sex trafficking, sexual violence, and harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation. For details of Equality Now's campaigns, please visit www.equalitynow.org [2].

Tags: [Gender Equality](#) [3]

Issue Number: [857](#) [4]

IssueOrder: 10

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Article-Summary:

As I reflect back on my 35 years of activism fighting injustices against women and girls, my feelings are conflicted. On the one hand, I have a sense of fulfilment arising from all I have contributed and the gains won along the way. But on the other, I know gender equality is still a dream, not a reality, and all I have done is just a drop in the ocean.

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Category: [Gender & Minorities](#) [5]

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[4] <https://www.pambazuka.org/article-issue/857>

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