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Girl-Led Research and Action Manual

An overview



Introduction

The Girl-Led Research and Action (GLRA) methodology centres adolescent girls as leaders in conducting research and advocacy on issues affecting their lives. Developed collaboratively across Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone between 2021-2025, the manual provides a framework for girls to design and lead their own research processes, analyse structural inequalities, and develop advocacy strategies for change.

The GLRA approach employs intersectional and decolonial feminist participatory frameworks, recognising that adolescent girls face distinct challenges shaped by multiple, intersecting identities including race, class, sexuality, disability, and geographic location. Rather than treating girls as research subjects, this methodology positions them as researchers, writers, and advocates who can identify pressing issues, propose solutions, and influence decision-makers. Throughout the manual adolescent girls are referred to as ‘researchers¹’.

A. The paradox of girl-led work

The manual raises a central dilemma: how do you keep research genuinely ‘girl-led’ while using a structured method? This tension reflects deeper questions about agency, authenticity, and power in youth participatory research. The manual argues that structured approaches can actually legitimize girl-led research within academic and policy contexts, providing girls with tools to navigate systems that might otherwise dismiss their contributions. Rather than prescribing rigid methods, the manual offers adaptable tools that girls can modify based on their contexts and goals, embracing the productive tension between

structure and agency in service of girls’ own research and advocacy visions’.

B. Why is this manual needed?

This manual highlights the power in girls in conducting their own research, and how it can help us to understand the critical gaps that affect teenage girls, and help to challenge traditional power structures that silence their voices. Across different contexts, adolescent girls have demonstrated remarkable capacity for leadership. Adolescent girls are best positioned to identify the most pressing issues affecting their lives, connect with their peers, and propose relevant and actionable solutions. To achieve this effectively, ActionAid has facilitated girl-led research and action (GLRA) methodology that prioritise girls’ knowledge, experience, strategies and solutions to their own challenges. The manuals are inherently adaptable and have proven effective across diverse settings; from urban and rural communities, as tools for both research and sensitisation.

What the girls have said and done

Below is a snapshot of some successes of the GLRA approach so far:

Bangladesh

The Girl-Led Research and Action project run by ActionAid Bangladesh has achieved remarkable impact across multiple dimensions of community health and empowerment. Most significantly, the project has fundamentally changed menstrual hygiene practices and attitudes in the community, with facilitators conducting door-to-door sessions that reached nearly 500 families.

The establishment of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) corners in local educational institutions has directly addressed



Figure 1 Illustration by Sreshta Suresh

one of the most pressing barriers to girls’ education – menstrual justice. Providing sanitary napkins at half the market price and creating environments that support students to study while menstruating have measurably improved female student attendance rates.

Beyond individual behaviour change, the project has achieved systemic advocacy success by engaging key community stakeholders including political and religious leaders. The adolescent girls secured commitments from the local Union Parishad Chairman for infrastructure improvements including washrooms for girls, breastfeeding corners, and permanent long term-government funding for SRHR corners. Equally important, they gained support from religious leaders, who now actively promote menstrual health awareness through mosque communications, helping to dismantle religious taboos. The project’s peer-to-peer education model has created a multiplier effect, with trained facilitators not only transforming their own communities but also inspiring neighbouring areas to seek similar interventions.



I was extremely afraid of public speaking and in such a condition, saying words like ‘period’ on public platforms was like a nightmare for me. But now, I confidently conduct sessions on menstrual hygiene management in my community.

Sumaya, 18-year-old researcher, Bangladesh

¹ It is good practice in Feminist Participatory Action Research to recognise those involved as knowledge holders, moving away from extractive research practices. As in GLRA the adolescent girls involved truly led the research process, it is only appropriate to refer to them as researchers.

Ethiopia

The Girl-Led Research and Action project in Ethiopia has achieved significant impact by supporting adolescent girls to confront and address gender-based violence and to champion their rights in their communities. Through a combination of education, advocacy training, partnerships with local organisations, and media outreach, the project built the knowledge, confidence, and practical skills of its participants, leading to tangible changes both for the girls involved and for the wider public. Key accomplishments include advocacy and legal training for dozens of girls aged 17-22, the production and broad dissemination of educational materials and advocacy videos in multiple local languages, and the establishment of peer networks and supportive links with organisations. Adolescent girls led media activities, including TV and radio, reaching millions and helping to break the silence surrounding GBV.

Nigeria



I have gained valuable skills in communication, leadership, and advocacy. I plan to apply these skills in my future endeavours to help create positive change in my community. The trainings I took provided me with valuable insights and knowledge on gender issues and ways to address them

Mahlet, researcher, Ethiopia

GLRA's work in Jigawa and the Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria has supported girls to amplify their voices, challenge social norms, and strengthen their confidence as advocates.



I'm so excited to share that I am now part of the sensitisation team... conducting sensitisation programs on early marriage and gender-based violence."

Firdausi, 18-year-old researcher, Nigeria

Through developing skills in advocacy, public speaking, and community engagement, these girls are now driving conversations around education, gender equality, and social justice. Girls are now stepping into leadership roles and influencing wider community attitudes, particularly on sensitive issues like early marriage and gender-based violence.

Sierra Leone

In Freetown, Sierra Leone, the GLRA has had a transformative impact by shifting power into the hands of girls, enabling them to investigate and articulate the challenges they face, and equipping them with the tools to advocate for change. This process supported the development of new skills, self-belief, and the sense that they could be powerful agents of change. The project has also laid the groundwork for long-term advocacy, with the girls preparing campaigns to address key issues such as education, gender-based violence, and child exploitation, and to push for policy reforms that protect girls' rights.

Why girl-led approaches matter

Supporting girl-led research and action is essential for several critical reasons:

- **Authentic Evidence Generation:** Girls investigating their own realities produce evidence that is nuanced, contextually grounded, and unlikely to be obtained through conventional research methods.



Figure 2 Illustration by Sreshta Suresh

Their insider perspectives reveal hidden barriers, unrecognised patterns of inequality, and solutions that external “experts” consistently overlook.

- **Sustainable Change:** When girls develop their own analysis of structural problems and design their own advocacy strategies, they create change that is locally relevant, culturally appropriate, and genuinely responsive to community needs. This ownership ensures interventions are more likely to be sustained beyond project timelines.
- **Building Feminist Movements:** GLRA develops the next generation of feminist

leaders with critical consciousness, research skills, and advocacy experience. These girls become catalysts for broader social transformation, challenging patriarchal structures while building solidarity with women's rights movements and other marginalized groups.

- **Challenging Colonial Knowledge Production:** By centring girls as knowledge creators rather than research subjects, GLRA disrupts colonial patterns that have historically positioned Western institutions as the sole legitimate producers of knowledge about girls' lives. This decolonial approach recognises diverse ways of knowing, and girls' expertise about their own experiences.

The manual's approach

Module 1: setting up a safe and supportive peer space

This foundational module establishes the conditions necessary for meaningful girl-led work. Before research begins, the researchers need time to build trust, get to know each other, and feel comfortable sharing experiences together. The module focuses on creating safe and brave spaces where girls can explore challenging topics, practice active listening, and establish group norms around confidentiality, respect, and inclusion.

A critical component is developing shared understanding of safeguarding—what it means, how it applies to the research process, and how girls can report concerns. Researchers learn about different types of harm and abuse, identify what safety means to them personally, and co-create safeguarding frameworks and reporting mechanisms that work for their context.

Module 2: gender and power

This module supports girls in analysing structural inequalities that shape their lives, exploring how gender, age, race, class, location, and other factors create different experiences of power and oppression. Girls examine their rights under national and international frameworks, learning how laws and policies should protect them while recognising gaps between written protections and lived realities.

Through exploring five types of power—power within (self-confidence and identity), power with (collective strength), power to (individual agency for change), power over (domination and

control), and power under (when structurally disadvantaged groups replicate oppressive patterns)—girls develop critical consciousness about how power operates in their lives and communities.

The module helps girls understand how they've been socialized into restrictive gender roles through examining expectations placed on girls, identifying characteristics societies label as “good” or “bad” for each gender, and recognising how these boxes limit human potential. By deconstructing these social constructions, girls begin to see how gender inequality is maintained and how it might be challenged.

Module 3: exploring issues relevant to girls' lives

Building on their understanding of power and gender, this module supports researchers to identify and document the main issues affecting them and their communities. This can be achieved through a series of different mapping, charting and reflection exercises.

What is key about any process which is working to collate the realities that affect adolescent girls in their lives, is to note that this collective knowledge is both a resource and a source of power on the girls' realities. Some of the exercises which may be useful to achieve this which are covered in the manual are: community mapping, body mapping, and daily activity charting.

Module 4: research for change

This module establishes that research is not merely evidence-gathering but a political act and form of activism aimed at concrete change. Adolescent girls can develop clear visions for why they're conducting research and how findings will be used for advocacy, linking research activities directly to desired outcomes from the outset.



Figure 3 Illustration by Sreshta Suresh

Researchers identify and prioritise themes from their previous mapping and exploration activities, and activities that allows them to collectively agree on their research topic. They conduct power mapping to understand who holds influence over their priority themes, analysing relationships between different stakeholders and identifying potential allies versus opponents. The module also introduces girls to existing policies, laws, services, and customary practices related to their themes, helping them identify gaps between formal protections and actual support available.

Module 5: conducting research in line with best practice

This module equips adolescent girl researchers with essential research ethics and practices, emphasizing that safeguarding must be woven throughout the entire process. Researchers

learn to obtain informed consent from all research participants, explaining research purposes, how information will be used, confidentiality protections, and participants' rights to opt out at any time.

Recognising that discussing sensitive topics can affect both researchers and participants, the module develops comprehensive self-care and collective care strategies. The module also covers practical research skills including asking open and prompting questions that encourage genuine dialogue rather than leading responses.

Module 6: developing the research approach

Building on their understanding of ethical research practices, adolescent girl researchers now design their specific research methodology. They develop research

questions that investigate what's happening (understanding questions), why it's happening (structural cause questions), and what could be different (change questions). Each question is tested against three criteria: will it deepen understanding? Will it create concrete evidence? Will it support advocacy for change?

Rather than prescribing specific tools, the module helps girls evaluate which approaches best suit the researchers objectives, questions, contexts, and the stakeholders they want to engage.

Module 7: safety and security

Safety planning is essential before beginning work. This module supports girls in systematically identifying and planning for potential risks during research and dissemination. Using different risk assessments, girls evaluate likelihood and impact of various risks to themselves, co-researchers, and community members, developing mitigation strategies for each identified concern.

Module 8: analysing the data

This module guides girls through analysing their research findings using intersectional and decolonial feminist frameworks. Analysis begins with girls sharing their research experiences and findings with each other, using creative presentations to make information accessible and engaging.

Girls then use structured analysis tools including problem trees to systematically map root causes, underlying factors, and effects of issues they've identified. This analysis connects girls' personal experiences to broader social and political structures, helping them see how individual challenges relate to systemic inequalities. Throughout analysis, girls are encouraged to question how power operates, who benefits from current arrangements, what

systems maintain inequalities, and where opportunities for change exist.

Module 9: advocacy and action plan

This module transforms research findings into concrete advocacy strategies. Girls begin by mapping potential allies across different levels—individuals, community organizations, government representatives, women's rights movements, and media contacts. They assess each potential ally's influence, current attitude toward their issues, and how best to approach them.

Girls then develop specific advocacy actions linked to their research findings and identified stakeholders. Actions might include direct engagement with decision-makers, community education campaigns, media outreach, creative performances, or grassroots organizing. For each action, girls specify clear objectives, target audiences, key messages, methods, resource requirements, and expected outcomes.

Module 10: creating resources and next steps

In this final module, girls create the specific materials needed to share their research and implement advocacy actions. Building on their analysis and advocacy plans, they develop key messages tailored for different audiences. Girls choose if to design various dissemination materials such as research reports, policy briefs, community presentations, peer education resources, media packages, or creative advocacy products like videos, posters, or performances. The format and style of each resource is matched to its intended audience and advocacy purpose. This comprehensive planning ensures girls can sustain their advocacy beyond the initial research phase, building toward long-term change in their communities.

Conclusion: the imperative of supporting girl-led work

The GLRA methodology represents more than a research framework—it is a transformative approach that fundamentally shifts power to adolescent girls, enabling them to become architects of change in their own lives and communities. As evidenced across Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, when girls are equipped with tools to investigate their realities, analyse structural inequalities, and lead advocacy efforts, they achieve remarkable outcomes that traditional top-down approaches consistently fail to deliver.

The impact speaks for itself: girls accessing international platforms to strengthen government accountability, presenting research findings to state-level technical working groups, and organizing public campaigns that raise awareness about critical issues like menstrual justice. These achievements demonstrate that adolescent girls possess not only the capacity for leadership but also unique insights into the most pressing challenges affecting their lives—insights that policymakers, donors, and development practitioners cannot afford to ignore.

A Call to Action

The GLRA manual provides a adaptable tools and examples of girl led change, but its potential can only be realized through sustained commitment and investment. Power holders must create space for girls' voices in decision-making processes, not as tokenistic

consultation but as genuine partnership. Donors must fund girl-led programming with the flexibility, trust, and long-term commitment these approaches require. Women's Rights Organizations need resources to facilitate girl-led processes while maintaining girls' ownership and leadership throughout.

Funding for girls' rights remains precarious, with cuts threatening to reverse hard-won progress. Yet the evidence is clear: investing in girl-led approaches delivers transformative outcomes, while building sustainable change.

The question facing the sector, government stakeholders, and the international community is not whether girls can lead—they have already proven they can. The question is whether they will be provided with the resources, platforms, and support to do so at scale. The GLRA manual offers a tested methodology; what's needed now is the political will and financial commitment to make girl-led research and action the norm rather than the exception.

Adolescent girls are not passive beneficiaries awaiting salvation—they are powerful agents of change who, when trusted with resources and methodologies to investigate and act, transform not only their own lives but entire communities. Supporting their leadership is not simply the right thing to do; it is the most effective strategy for achieving gender justice and sustainable development. The time to invest in girl-led futures is now.

You can find the complete manual here:

The GLRA manual is a reference guide for facilitating workshops for girls to design and lead their own research and advocacy processes, contribute to girl-led change, and shift power into the hands of girls. This manual was designed initially to support ActionAid's Girl-led Research and Girl-led Action projects. Since then, it has been piloted, and validated by girl researcher groups in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.



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