

# CASE STUDY

## GIRLS' NETWORK-MILAVF



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# INTRODUCTION

Through its Child Rights Governance Program, Save the Children contributes to the fulfillment of children and adolescents' rights by building their capacities to raise awareness among duty bearers and act collectively to create positive and lasting changes in their lives.

In Nicaragua, Save the Children supports the Girls' Network of the Luis Alfonso Velásquez Flores Child Movement (MILAVF, in Spanish). This network promotes the organized participation of girls and adolescents in all matters affecting them by making girls join efforts in order to transform their reality marked by gender inequities.

This case study of the Girls' Network covers the network's purpose, milestones, impacts on the lives of girl children and adolescents, best practices, and connection to Save the Children's theory of change.





# RECAPITULATING THE EXPERIENCE

## Establishment (1990-1994)

Girl children and adolescents who belong to the children's councils at the municipal level proposed the creation of a space or structure of their own based on the following considerations:

1. The persistence of gender-based roles, mandates, and stereotypes in our society delayed or blocked women's participation, thus creating forms of gender-based discrimination and concerns that also affected girl children and adolescent girls.
2. The planning children's councils did was centered around the interests of male children and adolescents who held most positions in the municipal and national boards. In turn, this bias made many of activities organized at the municipal level less interesting for women.
3. There was a need to create an exclusive space for girl children and adolescent girls where they could discuss women's topics and experiences comfortably, as men's presence held back women's participation.

This proposal motivated the implementation of a national assessment for girl children and adolescents who are members of MILAVE. This showed there was a need to create organizational and training processes targeted for women in order to provide them with a more focused assistance that is relevant and in line with their interests.

## 2 Creating the Conditions (1995- 2002)

In 1994, the Girls' Network was created as a permanent, independently-operated structure of MILAVF with municipal and national representation that answers solely to the consensus of its members—girl children and adolescents.

First, groups made up of 15-30 members from neighborhoods and communities were created, which would then hold meetings as part of the network and elected the municipal board through secret and direct vote. The board's role is to consult, plan, organize, and carry out activities, such as interest groups—beauty, dress-making, drawing, painting, handcrafts, dancing, singing, music, sports, environmental brigades—lectures, and workshops on topics in line with their rights and experiences.

Subsequently, all municipal boards gathered to elect a national-level board, which is in charge of supporting the work carried out locally.

## 3 Consolidation (2003 to date)

With Save the Children's support, the process of creating the Girls' Network began in 2003 by addressing various issues related to girls' rights and experiences which “they could not talk about at school, at home or in groups where there was male presence otherwise.”

After assessing the training process, MILAVF adopted the discussion group methodology, as it enables a more meaningful participation of girl children and adolescents. Moreover, a set of basic topics were defined, taking into account the topics that were suggested by girl children and adolescents.

Currently, the Girls' Network has a presence in all 43 municipalities where MILAVF is working and both interest and discussion groups constitute the core of their work.



# ACHIEVEMENTS

The Girls' Network has created a number of positive and lasting changes in the lives of many girl children and adolescents pertaining to their personal development, fulfillment of their rights, and organizational and advocacy capacities. The main achievements are shown below:

**Increased empowerment of their rights.** The topics of the discussion groups helped girl children and adolescents be aware of and own their rights, develop the capacity necessary to stand up for them, and use legal resources when their rights are threatened or violated. This helped them gain a new life perspective, question the mandates and roles society tries to impose on them, and reflect on the fact that they can play the leading role in their own life.

***“My mind is now more open... I know my rights to the letter.”***

**Life Skills Strengthening.** Interaction among peers and education on human rights have helped strengthen girls' resilience, self-esteem, and skills necessary to socialize with peers, boys, and adults. All the previously mentioned factors help girls get a better self-perception, stand up for their rights, express their views, and present proposals that need to be fulfilled.

***“After almost dying, I found the Girls' Network; it taught me how to love and value myself.”***

**Life Projects.** Girl children and adolescents have developed the ability to imagine the life they can look forward to by not focusing on immediacy and the limitations of the present—they have new vision and goals in their lives. They recognize they are the ones who play the leading role in the story of their life and do not see themselves as victims of circumstances anymore.

***“Through the network, I learned to choose to be the girl that I wanted to be.”***

**Higher Gender Awareness.** The network has helped girl children and adolescents recognize they have equal rights and opportunities as their male counterparts, and question the mandates and roles society, and even family members, try to impose on them.

***“I learned that men and women are the same... This had a great impact on me because my family is very traditional and I thought women belonged in the household... The network changed my life.”***

**Consolidation of the Network.** MILAVF included the Girls' Network into their institutional culture by adopting it as a structure of expression at the municipal and national level. From this platform, girl children and adolescents can do the activities they like, reflect on topics they think are relevant, and organize themselves to advocate the fulfillment of their rights among their families, communities, and authorities.

***“We are convinced that girls need to have their own spaces because their interests, expectations, and experiences are unique.”***

# THEORY OF CHANGE

The Girls' Network exemplifies the four core components of Save the Children's theory of change, which supports its mission of creating positive and lasting changes in the lives of girl children and adolescent girls.

**Innovation.** The network is an innovation because it provides a space that is meant for girl children and adolescents only where they can see their singularities and interests met. Here, they can socialize, have fun, learn, reflect on their experiences, and organize themselves to propose solutions to problems affecting the fulfillment of their rights. It is also innovative because it works with girls from the early childhood stage—age 4—by making them recognize they are entitled to participate in interest and discussion groups and vote to elect the boards members.

**Collaboration.** The girl children and adolescent girls who are members of the network join efforts to raise awareness among municipal/local authorities and social players by drawing attention to the situations that have an impact on their lives and by proposing solutions. Moreover, links to organizations working for children's and women's rights have been established so they can promote children's participation with a gender perspective.

**Being the Voice.** The Girls' Network is a space that gives child girls and adolescent girls the chance to find their own voice; they take on the leading role in promoting their rights and gender equity among their peers. Furthermore, the network helps strengthen the organizational and mobilization capacity of the girls, as they are important elements for when presenting their proposals to decision-makers at the municipal and national level. Overall, this experience helped girl children and adolescents join their voices to be heard.

**Results to scale.** MILAVF has disseminated its experience with the Girls' Network among peer organizations and women's movements and has urged them to work for gender equity right from childhood, and to incorporate girl children and adolescents' rights into their agendas.



## BEST PRACTICES

### **Defining the topics for the discussion groups.**

Selecting topics that are essential for girl children and adolescents to discuss has helped direct the actions of the network towards common goals related to personal development (self-esteem, family relationships, friendships, and the sense of life), awareness of their rights and gender equity (human rights and discrimination against girls), and social change (children's participation).

**Inclusive approach.** The network has a significant number of girl children and adolescents in all municipalities, thus favoring social inclusion of traditionally-excluded social groups on the basis of their socioeconomic conditions (religion, cultural identity, level of welfare), life circumstances (survivors of violence or people at social risk), or personal characteristics (disability). In almost all municipalities, the network has engaged girl children and adolescents with physical-motor disabilities in their activities.



A set of best practices that enhances the impact the network has on the lives of girl children and adolescents were identified, among these practices are:

### **Adoption of affirmative action measures.**

The fact that the municipal presidents were accepted into their respective children's councils and the national president was accepted into the national council and the MILAVF's General Assembly has helped the incorporation of girl children and adolescents' interests into the strategic planning and for it to be gender aware.

**Discussion groups.** The methodology incorporates general exercises to introduce the discussion and assessment exercises to allow participants to express what they think about a specific statement. Its interactive nature has helped girl children and adolescents feel more comfortable talking about topics they are interested in or experiences that affect the exercise of their rights, thus helping prevent situations that violate their rights as well as their restitution.

**Working with mothers.** Training processes have been implemented with mothers in order for them, just like with girl children and adolescents, to own their rights, which is an essential condition for recognizing their daughters' rights and support them through their personal development processes.



## CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

The Girls' Network is a valuable experience of and for girl children and adolescents that is helping create positive and lasting changes in their lives by strengthening their knowledge of their own rights and building capacity to demand their rights and advocate their fulfillment.

The interest and discussion groups allowed girl children and adolescents to exchange knowledge, experiences, and situations that are unique to their being girls and women by providing mutual support and understanding, thus strengthening their self-esteem and life skills, which are essential for them to feel empowered about their rights and to fulfill their life projects.

Moreover, the network enhances the gender equity approach by allowing girl children and adolescents to recognize themselves as “valuable” women who are “capable” of realizing their dreams, thus leaving behind the roles, mandates, and stereotypes society and, even their families, want to impose on them for the rest of their lives. Also, girls are taking over leadership of a positive social change process towards equal opportunities and gender equity.

This innovative experience, that contributed to promoting gender equity from childhood, helped girl children and adolescents collaborate with other players to advocate jointly among municipal and national authorities by raising their voices to make demands and proposals towards the fulfillment of their rights.

MILAVF is planning on continuing to strengthen the Girls' Network until higher-scale results are achieved. In order to do so, it intends to expand the network to other municipalities and promote its scalability among peer organizations.

In the coming years, MILAVF will continue to promote gender equity mainstreaming and to strengthen girl children and adolescents' participation quality from the network through its institutional work.