



# SUPPORTING YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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**RESEARCH BRIEF**  
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But what the young women are always saying is: it's not just about [the idea] that we are the future. We are leading now!

– RiseUp! training participant, Bougainville



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Between 2016 and 2018 researchers at Monash GPS, in partnership with the World YWCA and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) conducted research into the leadership qualities and approaches of young women in Asia and the Pacific. The purpose of the research was to understand how young women lead, what barriers they face, and the opportunities that exist to support and extend their leadership. It did so in conjunction with an independent evaluation of the DFAT funded “RiseUp!” program in which nine national YWCA offices deliver human rights training to young women. This brief presents the main findings and recommendations from this research.

## MAIN FINDINGS

- 1 Young women challenge dominant approaches to leadership by leading in ways that are based upon collaborative, shared and horizontal power relationships, and in spaces that are often considered informal and private.
- 2 Young women see confidence as being the most important aspect of their leadership. In communities where confidence in young women is discouraged or downplayed, young women see confidence as being about the development of knowledge and skills (like public speaking) and a set of values (such as self-belief) which are often hard-won.
- 3 The research finds that supporting young women’s leadership not only increases the knowledge, confidence and opportunities available to young women, but also has a positive impact upon gender equality and the realisation of young women’s rights in the home and community.
- 4 Young women see the main barriers to the development of their leadership as being the masculine and ageist bias in leadership, the lack of community support and willingness to see young women as leaders (which may include backlash against them) and access to dedicated programs that support young women’s leadership.
- 5 The main enablers of young women’s leadership are the widespread promotion of young women’s rights, the creation of safe spaces, the building of peer networks to allow young women to work together, the modelling of strong inter-generational leadership, and the support of local communities.



*Delegates to the young women’s leadership workshop with Australia’s Ambassador for Women and Girls, Sharman Stone and World YWCA General Secretary Malayah Harper, Canberra October, 2017.*

## EMPOWERING YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP & ADVOCACY in ASIA & the PACIFIC



### 5 WAYS to ENCOURAGE, SUPPORT and ADVANCE YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP:



## A NEW THEORY OF YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

This research has found that young women across Asia and the Pacific lead in ways that fundamentally challenge traditional and dominant models of leadership. This challenge opens up opportunities to think about leadership – and its potential impact – in innovative ways that are more relevant and inclusive of young women's lives. Young women reported that they see leadership in the following ways:

### PRIVATE AND PUBLIC

For young women, leadership occurs in both public and private spaces. Young women in particular show leadership in private spaces through the decisions they make regarding their own lives, and supporting other young women to do the same. This might be very personal or private decisions such as choosing who and when to marry, or when to have a child. The research shows that young women routinely demonstrate this form of leadership and its impacts are widespread. This type of leadership creates change in their own lives and that of their peers, but can also challenge discriminatory cultural and social norms by beginning conversations in families and communities about the roles and expectations of young women. Young women point out that while public leadership on issues such as these can change laws, this is not always enough to stop the practice. It also requires cultural and attitudinal changes from within families and communities.

### INFORMAL AND FORMAL

Consequently, young women's leadership moves seamlessly and necessarily across public and private, formal and informal boundaries. In this sense, they might not be appointed to (and in fact may be actively excluded from) formal leadership roles within their communities, but may nonetheless find themselves assuming leadership roles in informal contexts. Like leadership in private spaces, leadership in informal spaces – such as church, school, or youth groups – plays a role in challenging discriminatory attitudes and generating social and cultural change. Like leadership in private spaces, the impact of young women's leadership in informal spaces is often unrecognised, and its impact is therefore underestimated by broader communities.

### HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL

The young women who participated in this research see leadership as a shared journey in which they can all equally contribute. This stands in contrast to traditional models of leadership where power is distributed vertically, with the leader at the top of the power structure. Instead, young women adopt horizontal power-sharing structures and participatory approaches to leading which rely heavily upon their networks for input, support and validation. Throughout the research project this was demonstrated in group meetings of young women, and in social media spaces where young women openly support one another in a common commitment to amplify their voices and access their rights.

## **COLLABORATIVE AND CONSULTATIVE**

The young women involved in this research overwhelmingly believed that collaboration and consultation is seen as central to the success and authenticity of their leadership. Most young women do not require a formal structure to authenticate their leadership. Instead, their leadership is validated by themselves and their peers through collaboration and consultation.

## **TRANSFORMATIVE**

Leadership is seen by young women as a way of transforming their own lives, and their communities. This transformation takes place when young women can successfully challenge the barriers to their rights, whether they be social, cultural, legal, or structural.

# **WHY DOES SUPPORTING YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP MATTER?**

The research found that programs that support young women's leadership have the potential to positively impact young women's lives and address gender inequality in the community. It does so by starting or contributing to conversations about young women's roles. All of the young women who have taken on a leadership role in their communities had – at some point – engaged in a leadership program and had relied upon the skills, knowledge and networks they had attained. In particular, the research found that supporting young women's leadership programs had the following impacts:

## **GAINING CONFIDENCE TO CHANGE LIVES**

The most significant impact of young women's leadership training is upon young women's self-confidence. Young women report having been able to challenge barriers to their further leadership and to engage in issues, activities, and conversations with people that they might not otherwise have the skill, courage or knowledge to.

## **RESHAPING ROLES AND BEHAVIOURS WITHIN THE FAMILY**

The research found consistent evidence of young women sharing their leadership knowledge and experience with family members, in ways that changed their own lives and supported family members. In one case from Bangladesh, a young woman used knowledge gained from the RiseUp! training to explain to her parents why she did not want an arranged marriage, and the potential harm it could bring to her. In another case from India, a young woman used her newly acquired knowledge to assist an HIV+ family member to access healthcare. This

## **THE ROLE OF CONFIDENCE**

Young women see confidence as the fundamental and driving characteristic of leadership. For most young women in this study, this confidence is neither innate or easily grasped. These young women live in social and cultural contexts where self-confidence in young women is discouraged and they are not socialised for either assertiveness or leadership. Young women associate the kind of confidence needed for leadership as being both a set of values (self-belief and trust) and a set of skills (public speaking, negotiation, and listening). This confidence underpins all their leadership activities.

changed her status within the family and the attitudes of family members towards her. In short, several young women reported that the leadership training had led to positive outcomes, including the lifting of restrictive social and cultural restraints upon their lives and life choices, and shifting the power dynamics that young women experienced within family groups.

## **GENDER EQUALITY**

The research found some evidence of a positive overall impact upon gender equality in the communities where young women's leadership programs had been running. According to community groups, this occurs in two ways: first, leadership training for young women led to conversations within families and communities regarding how young women are (and should be) treated and, second, young women had newly acquired knowledge which encouraged them to advocate and agitate for their rights.

## **BUILDING A RIGHTS-BASED CULTURE**

Young women who had participated in the training reported that they would be or had been more likely to engage in a range of community-based issues and activities as a result of the training. Several of the Rise Up! training participants interviewed for this research went on to become involved in specific projects within their community around climate change, peace and reconciliation, women's formal political participation, and the promotion of women's rights. The vision of leadership was not simply about promoting and protecting rights but was also about living and breathing a human rights-based culture.

# IDENTIFYING THE BARRIERS TO YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Efforts to support young women's leadership often exists within a broader culture that dismisses – or worse is openly hostile to – young women's rights. The research identified the following barriers across all nine case study countries in Asia and the Pacific.

## THE MASCULINE BIAS IN LEADERSHIP

Across all nine countries research participants pointed to adult men as being the recognised as the legitimate leaders in their communities. A number of participants noted that their community was either hostile or dismissive of women leaders and that young women leaders were not taken seriously. Young women believe that these community perceptions create deep cultural and structural biases against their own leadership.

## THE AGEIST BIAS IN LEADERSHIP

The research also found that there is widespread prejudice against seeing young people as legitimate leaders. This attitude is particularly strong with regard to young women leaders, creating a double burden for them. Throughout the research process, many community leaders were reluctant to be challenged in their traditional views of who or what constituted a leader. At best, young women were referred to as "future leaders" by older community leaders.

## ABSENCE OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The reports revealed several contexts where young women faced negative responses for their involvement in the leadership training or activities. Some were discouraged by village chiefs from attending or discussing the leadership training, and experienced social marginalisation or threats of violence. In response to this, young women reported

“Because after I spend my nine months in YWCA, I have already told you that I am a changed person. I feel like I'm more self-confident. I can do this. I can do this. Yes, I can talk with [people]. People know I don't feel hesitant. I don't feel shy. Yes, I can do it, you know? [It's an] inner kind of feeling, self-confidence, that comes inside me.

- RiseUp Training Participant, Nepal.

that they drew support and advice from community allies, their personal networks and safe spaces for young women.

In a number of countries young women also reported inadequate access to services that would support their rights. In particular, this included access to services that support women to leave violent relationships, and receive sexual and reproductive health services. Research participants exhibited a level of frustration in being taught about their rights, but experiencing roadblocks in accessing them.

## ACCESS TO DEDICATED PROGRAMS

This research shows that young women's leadership is best developed in young women only spaces. Young women report that they feel marginalised or muted in both youth and general women's programs. The YWCA's RiseUp! program demonstrates the value of young women only spaces, however such programs are rare, with NGOs and community leaders calling for more young-women only projects.



## THE YWCA'S RISEUP! PROGRAM

The World YWCA's RiseUp! program is designed to empower young women to support one another to become leaders in their own lives, communities and globally. With the support of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the RiseUp! program has been implemented across nine countries: Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Through a 'Train the Trainer' model, the program supports young women leaders to train other young women on issues such as violence against women (VAW), sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), building human rights knowledge, and leadership skills.

Respect Knowledge Humble  
Consult Confident Responsible  
no-bias Positive Skills Motivate  
Collaborate Encourage listen  
passionate honest

## OPPORTUNITIES TO ENABLE YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

While the report has identified several barriers to empowering young women as leaders, it also highlights enablers which help young women to navigate or mitigate the highlighted barriers. Some of these enablers are identified below:

### BUILDING KNOWLEDGE ON YOUNG WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Young women's leadership journeys often begin with a recognition and understanding of their rights. Therefore, human rights education, for both young women and the broader community, can be a major enabler of young women becoming – and being accepted as – leaders. The research showed that in some cases, young women and their communities were unaware of the illegality of practices such as family violence, marital rape and forced marriage.

### THE CREATION OF SAFE SPACES AND SUPPORTING PEER LEADERSHIP

The research found that the provisioning of safe spaces is central to young women's empowerment. These safe spaces are a primary site for knowledge-

sharing and confidence-building. Young women use safe spaces to share information, seek advice, devise strategies to address common issues, and support one another.

### INTERGENERATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The research found that successful examples of formal and informal intergenerational leadership has the effect of supporting young women's leadership development, but also contributing to sustainable and fluid movement building.

### A COMMUNITY INCLUSIVE APPROACH

The research shows that one of the key barriers to young women's leadership is community resistance. Therefore, the community should be encouraged to contribute to the cultural change necessary to achieve gender equality. Particularly, emphasis should be placed on including those who are in 'traditional' leadership roles. Therefore empowering women to access their rights must sit alongside empowering communities to address the barriers to those rights.

“ Reflecting on my leadership journey, I still remember the day, which is a turning point in my life. It was in 2013 where I first joined the young women's leadership training in Bangkok as a young women's coordinator. I was scared, I was shy, and I did not have confidence to do public speaking or ask questions. I vividly remember that on the first day I chose to sit at the table behind the tile so that I cannot be seen. But, for the whole day, I witnessed young women presenting their ideas, young women speaking up with confidence. Their empowerment infects me, which make [sic] me reflect that if they can do it, I can try.

- YWCA Young Women's Coordinator

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1 SUPPORT AND BUILD YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

Young women can bring unique perspectives, experiences, skills and knowledge to broader community-engaged activities. Facilitating the inclusion of young women in core events, activities, and decision-making forums will strengthen outcomes and contribute to the cultural change needed for young women's leadership to be broadly recognised. This could be done in decision-making bodies, forums, workshops, events, community consultations and negotiations by:

- Reserving space for young women's meaningful participation;
- Facilitating young women's participation by providing logistical and financial support;
- Creating safe spaces or 'side events' where young women can consult with one another at large forums;
- Highlighting the unique perspective of young women (for instance, International Women's Day events could be themed on 'young women's leadership');

### 2 BUILD COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Communities can be both enablers and constraints upon young women's leadership. Opportunities should be sought to engage communities in dialogue about young women's rights and the positive impacts of young women's leadership. This should simultaneously be targeted at addressing gender inequality in the community, including the ageist and biased attitudes to leadership.

### 3 CREATE SAFE SPACES FOR YOUNG WOMEN

Safe spaces can be both physical and virtual spaces. Young women can use safe spaces to build networks, support one another, share knowledge, and develop strategies and ideas. They can be created in schools, workplaces, as part of community programs and at events and forums.

### 4 MODEL INTER-GENERATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Inter-generational leadership – where younger and older leaders commit to collaborative leadership and learning from one another – is a positive enabler of young women's leadership. Such leadership models can be adopted in schools, the workplace, and community-based decision-making forums and organisations.



“Mobilising Young Women’s Leadership in Asia and the Pacific” is a joint research partnership between Monash GPS and the World YWCA, funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Research for this project was undertaken by Associate Professor Katrina Lee-Koo and Dr Lesley Pruitt. The full research findings can be viewed on the Monash GPS website.

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