

Girl Rising Uses the Power of Stories to Ignite Change

Educating girls empowers individuals, strengthens families, reduces poverty, and drives sustainable economic and social development for entire communities.

Virginia Terry
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India



Cynthia lives in Kibera, one of the world's largest informal settlements, just outside Nairobi, Kenya. In a community where government services are scarce and quality education is difficult to access, her path to learning has been filled with obstacles. As a daughter entering her teenage years, she is expected to take on household chores and care for her siblings while her mother works outside the home. Financial difficulties have made school fees unpredictable, and Cynthia feared her education was slipping away.

At age 13, a chance encounter with a young educator changed her trajectory in life. Cynthia learned about Girl Rising's RISE program, offered through our local partner, Sunflower Trust. At the Sunflower Trust community center, she was introduced to the stories of girls from Haiti, Peru, India, and Nepal — girls who, despite facing discrimination and barriers, forged their own paths with personal courage and the support of allies. Through these stories, Cynthia gained a deeper understanding of her right to education and came to appreciate its power — not just for herself, but also for her family and community.

Two years later, Cynthia attends school regularly, applying the communication, leadership, and advocacy skills she developed through RISE. She mentors younger students and champions education as a fundamental right. She now speaks confidently about her aspirations to become a leader in human rights and improve the quality of life in her community.

Cynthia's journey exemplifies Girl Rising's approach: using stories to shift mindsets, build confidence, and drive change in marginalized communities.



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The Origins of Girl Rising

Today, Girl Rising is an international nonprofit that has reached tens of thousands of adolescents through education programs in India, Kenya, Guatemala, Pakistan, and beyond. But our beginnings were far from traditional.

In 2011, Girl Rising began as a media project. Our team originally set out to create a film about solutions to global poverty, and one insight became impossible to ignore: girls' education is one of the most powerful forces for economic and social progress. Educating girls leads to better health outcomes, stronger economies, greater environmental sustainability, and higher education rates across entire communities.

Rather than focus on statistics and policy, the documentary team made the pivotal choice to tell the stories of real girls. Instead of a film about the issues of girls' education, they created a film about Ruksana, Azmera, Nasreen, Senna, and five other girls, bringing

their true stories and the barriers to education to life in a deeply personal way. That decision — to center real, human stories — became the foundation of Girl Rising's theory of change, which still guides us today.

As the film took shape, so did a vision for something bigger. With funding from USAID, the team launched a companion social action campaign, expanding beyond storytelling to education initiatives in Nigeria, India, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These early programs engaged young people, teachers, families, and community leaders to help dismantle barriers to girls' education.

By 2017, Girl Rising had officially transitioned into a nonprofit, refining and expanding our programs through rigorous evaluation and close collaboration with local partners — because those working within communities know best what solutions will drive lasting change.



Girl Rising Today: A Holistic Approach to Education Programs

Despite progress in girls' education over the last two decades, millions of girls worldwide still face systemic barriers that limit their ability to thrive and lead. Deeply ingrained social norms and biases continue to shape their experiences, opportunities, and self-perception. These challenges are even greater for girls in marginalized and rural communities, where limited resources, family responsibilities, and societal expectations further constrain their opportunities.

Global crises — climate change, conflict, displacement, and rapid technological shifts — widen these gaps. As the world transforms, girls risk falling behind in acquiring the skills needed to navigate a changing economy, lead change, and build a sustainable future.

Investing in girls' education and leadership is not just about equity — it is about progress for all. The world needs their ideas, talents, and voices to



tackle today's most pressing challenges. Achieving true gender equity requires more than just educating girls; it means building a network of allies — families, teachers, and community leaders — who champion their education and well-being.

RISE, Girl Rising's flagship education program, is designed to meet these challenges head-on, using



a story-driven, community-centered, and locally tailored approach. Over the years, RISE has evolved through rigorous evaluation, deep collaboration with local partners, and continuous innovation, ensuring it remains culturally relevant, impactful, and scalable.

Girl Rising works hand-in-hand with grassroots organizations, ensuring our approach is deeply informed by the communities we serve. Our partners understand cultural contexts and local barriers, making RISE responsive and adaptable. In Kenya, for example, RISE has been adapted to complement local curricula and has been accredited by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), which is a testament to its credibility and alignment with national education standards. In India, we are collaborating with government authorities to expand our reach.

Sustainable change doesn't happen in isolation. That's why RISE engages with a range of stakeholders who can help support young people's education and ensures that students are surrounded



by advocates who reinforce learning beyond the classroom:

- **Students** develop self-confidence, critical thinking, and leadership skills.
- **Teachers & School Leaders** gain tools and strategies to create inclusive learning environments.
- **Parents & Caregivers** receive guidance on how to support their children's education.
- **Community Leaders** mobilize long-term support for gender-equitable education.

The RISE Storytelling Module

From the beginning, Girl Rising has used storytelling to drive change. Now, we are taking this work further — not just sharing stories, but helping young people themselves to craft and share their stories.

What started as a pilot project two years ago is now a core part of RISE. The 10-session Storytelling module guides students through the process of discovering, shaping, and expressing their own stories — helping them see their lives as valuable, powerful narratives.

For example, one of the exercises is the Six-Word Memoir, where students distill their experiences into just six words. These memoirs from Kenyan students capture their pride and purpose:

“Struggle Enough. Keeping Hope. Getting Future.”

“I am a Very Beautiful Daughter.”

“I’m Proud to Be a Conservationist.”



Through poetry, skits, video diaries, and journals, students find their voice and deepen their sense of identity. At the end of the module, students share their favorite pieces with their community, turning storytelling into an act of courage and empowerment. When it's their turn to speak, we remind them, "Say it loud, and say it proud," because their voices deserve to be heard.

Measuring Impact

Three years ago, with support from Echidna Giving, Girl Rising launched a comprehensive three-year evaluation of our RISE program to measure its impact across Pakistan, Kenya, and India. The results reveal deep, lasting shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors — not only among students but also among teachers and parents.

Across all three countries, parents, teachers, and students overwhelmingly valued the program. Over 90% of students in focus groups recalled the films, activities, or lessons as something they deeply appreciated. Teachers praised the curriculum's engaging storytelling and found the stories to be relevant and relatable, although some wished for additional content that reflected their own local

contexts. Parents, too, found the films memorable and impactful, particularly the way they highlighted caregivers supporting their daughters' education. Teachers noted that the training and curriculum guides were highly useful, although some expressed a desire for ongoing support during implementation.

The evaluation also demonstrated a measurable shift in attitudes toward gender and education. By the end of the program, 82% or more of surveyed students and teachers strongly agreed that education should be a right for all, up from 77% at baseline. Students' perspectives on gender equality in education also evolved significantly. Many who initially believed that educating boys was more important than educating girls changed their stance, recognizing the equal value of education for all. Teachers who already supported girls' education in principle reported a deeper awareness of the gendered barriers girls face, with over 80% feeling more motivated to engage parents and advocate for girls staying in school. Parents also reassessed their views, describing how the program shifted their perceptions about the importance of educating their daughters.





Beyond attitudes, Girl Rising helped students build voice, agency, and perseverance.

Many girls in Pakistan, Kenya, and India articulated new aspirations that challenged traditional gender roles, expressing dreams of becoming doctors, judges, engineers, pilots, and founders of schools. Boys also showed increased perseverance, with 79% or more strongly agreeing that when they face challenges, they try again. One student in Kenya summed it up best: “Girl Rising helped me to be courageous and never to give up, even if I face many challenges.” These findings reinforce what we’ve long believed — when young people see themselves reflected in powerful stories, they find the confidence to dream bigger, advocate for themselves, and take action.

An Imperative for the Future

In a world facing growing inequality, political division, and economic uncertainty, the need for education as a force for progress has never been greater. When access to learning is limited by gender, geography, or circumstance, we all lose out on the ideas, talents, and leadership of countless young people who could help solve the challenges of our time. Education is the great



equalizer; it lifts families out of poverty, strengthens economies, and builds more just and stable societies. Yet, we are witnessing a troubling backlash against the rights of women and girls, threatening hard-won gains in education and opportunity. With the world’s population growing, we cannot afford to leave half of humanity behind. Ensuring every girl and boy has access to quality education isn’t just about fairness — it’s about securing a future where we can all thrive.



The stories of young people in Pakistan, Kenya, India, and beyond show us what's possible when education is within reach. They remind us that progress isn't inevitable — it's something we must continue to fight for. We must open doors for all children, giving them the tools, skills, and confidence to shape their own futures. This means advocating for policies that protect and expand access to education, supporting programs like those of Girl Rising, and amplifying the voices of young people so they can see their experiences as valuable and their potential as limitless. Whether through sharing their stories, mentoring, or championing equitable policies, each of us has a role to play. Together, we can build a world where every child — regardless of gender, income, or geography — has the chance to learn, lead, and create a better future for us all.

www.girlrising.org

Disclosure Statement:

The author is an employee of Girl Rising.

Also From Girl Rising

The Spark

The Spark is Girl Rising's digital publication dedicated to amplifying the stories, advocacy, and ideas of the organization's Student Ambassador community. Young leaders discuss issues they care about and inspire change.



Some recent topics:

The Shadow of Cyberbullying: How Digital Violence Impacts Girls' Education

by Ariadna Beneventi Pacheco

Empowering Girls in Internally Displaced Persons Camps: A Call for Hope

by Efonya Faith Habu

We Need More Girls in STEM

By Charlotte Jacobus

<https://www.girlrising.org/thespark>

Girls' Access to Education

Programs around the world are working to ensure girls have access to education, including:

Malala Fund – Advocates for girls' education and funds local education initiatives.

<https://malala.org>

Room to Read – Focuses on literacy and girls' education in Asia and Africa.

www.roomtoread.org

Plan International – "Because I Am a Girl"

Campaign – Empowers girls through education and advocacy.

<https://plan-international.org/girls-rights/because-i-am-a-girl>

CARE's Education Programs – Focuses on increasing access to quality education for marginalized girls.

www.care.org/our-work/education

Educate Girls – Works in rural India to enroll out-of-school girls and improve school infrastructure.

www.educategirls.ngo



Girl Up – A UN Foundation initiative that trains young leaders to support girls' education worldwide.

<https://girlup.org>

CAMFED (Campaign for Female Education) – Provides scholarships, mentorship, and leadership training for girls in Africa.

<https://camfed.org>

She's the First – Supports grassroots organizations providing scholarships and mentorship for girls.

<https://shethethefirst.org>