Girls voices in Myanmar: Getting louder, being heard
ANNUAL REPORT 2018
Girl Determined helps girls to recognize their personal and group potential. In Myanmar, we are sparking a movement of girls who have the leadership skills to advocate for their own rights and a future that does not re-create the challenges and risks they now face.

Girls struggle with restrictive gender roles, poverty, dangerous labor, violence and early marriage. Through our programming, adolescent girls gain critical skills and confidence to assert their needs and develop plans to improve their lives.

Working since 2010, Girl Determined has been the only organization in the country to work exclusively with adolescent girls, which we do through our foundational “Colorful Girls” program. Colorful Girls has reached over 8,500 girls ages 12 to 17 in rural and urban communities across the country. Our weekly Colorful Girls Circles follows a structured, activity-based curriculum spanning two consecutive years. Some of the topics the girls from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds tackle include learning communication skills with peers and adults; building knowledge of their bodies and reproductive health; learning about other religions and tolerance; identifying and helping change the real challenges in their lives; and planning their future and making decisions, all while strengthening friendships, and having some fun!

Girl Determined is a US-registered 501(c)3, based in Myanmar.
THREE GIRLS’ STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION
A girl just starting Colorful Girls weekly circles and sports

In the Circle, I learned that being a girl is okay. We don’t have to be depressed about it, or feel stressed about our lives.

~Hay Mar, 15
Kwe Chan Village, Tanintharyi Region
This is my first year living in this village. I’m in grade 10. I have two siblings – I’m the middle child.

My elder brother isn’t in school. He’s married and working. My parents are rice farmers. We are Tavoyan.

I am a few years behind in school because my family and I lived in Thailand for two years after I finished first grade. I didn’t go to school at all during that time, so when we came back, I was old for my grade. Now that I am back in my village, I have lots of friends. I even have one I can tell all my feelings and personal problems to.

I decided to join Colorful Girls by myself. What I like is the sports, like playing volleyball. My arms got really sore when we first started, but not anymore. Before I joined, I didn’t really play sports, just football in the village sometimes, but nothing organized.

In the Circle, I learned that being a girl is okay. We don’t have to be depressed about it, or feel stressed about our lives. I’ve learned about my rights, too. We are in Week Eight and we’re going to learn about our periods soon. I’m looking forward to learning about that. People tell us that girls shouldn’t be around boys when they’re menstruating because if we come into contact with their skin, it will harm them. I don’t agree with that. I also disagree with the idea that boys are smarter. Our brains are the same. The harder we try, the smarter we will be and the better skills we will have.

I want to go to university after high school. I think I should be the one to decide what I study, not my parents. I want to be smart and have enough confidence to be in front of other people. It’s going to take some work to change myself to be like that. It’s still hard for me to talk about my own opinions or ideas or things I’m concerned about in front of other people. I envy people who can do that. I want to be more like them.
THREE GIRLS’ STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION
A girl about to complete two years of Colorful Girls Programs

“In the Circle, we would talk about how men and women could be equal. I had to think a lot and eventually, my views changed.”

~Thu Zar, 15
Sagaing Town, Sagaing Region
I have been living as a nun in Sagaing for five years now because the situation in my village is not very good.

I left after there was fighting nearby and gunfire in the village. We had to hide in holes in the ground until the shooters left. My older brother was forced to join the Ta’ang National Liberation Army as soon as he finished high school. Everyone, boys and girls, has to join after finishing high school. No one can refuse. Now only my mother and father are left at home. We used to live together happily. Now seven of my siblings and I are living here in Sagaing.

I don’t have much say in my family. I don’t know if my parents will let me continue my education or not because our financial situation is not good. If I could decide for myself, of course I would stay in school.

I work at a noodle factory during the hot season and on weekends. I make 2,500 MMK a day. I am tall, so I have to do more work than some of the other girls because I can reach the highest racks for drying the noodles. Anyway, it’s worth it because if we save this money, maybe we can keep the TNLA from taking another one of my brothers into the army.

Back in Shan State, there were no Colorful Girls programs. Here in Sagaing, I was able to go through Colorful Girls’ two-year program. When I first started, the people around me didn’t always understand what the program was about. I told people about all the things we did, like how we shared our feelings and experiences.

At first, I had problems with the head nun. She would tell me, you are a girl, why are you going out to Colorful Girls? You have chores here in the temple. When she said things like that to me, I remembered what happened in the Circle. We would talk about how men and women could be equal. I had to think a lot and eventually, my views changed. I could see that it was true – men and women can be the same. I told the head nun what I had learned many times.

After some time, she and other people understood the value of what I was doing in the Circle and stopped questioning me. They don’t restrict me and the other girls as much anymore.

If I could, I would like to go back to my village and help them set up a program there. I want to help girls be able to participate in Colorful Girls and have other opportunities like that, too. There’s so much we need there – even a doctor cannot reach our village easily.
THREE GIRLS’ STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION
From Colorful Girl to a young woman leader

“Learning to feel confident and have hope has been so important for us to be able to lead in our lives and help make change for other girls, too.”

~Ji Mai, 18
IDP Camp, Kachin State
I was born in a village in Kachin State, the “Land of Jade.”

In 2012 when I was 12 years old and preparing for my sixth-grade exam, war broke out nearby. We fled the shelling and searched for a safe place for several months before finally making our way to a camp near Myitkyina for internally-displaced people.

I’ve been living in the camp for over five years. Girls like us living here experience discrimination. For example, the school divides us refugees from the students from the host community. They put us in a different classroom with poor facilities. Just surviving every day is difficult. Some girls leave school to look for work. Many may be exploited – some have even been trafficked. Some girls don’t have much hope and can’t see better options than to get married very young. We have a lot of stress from the living conditions and problems we face.

In 2014, I joined Colorful Girls along with the other girls in my camp when I was fourteen. I went through the Circles and got involved in sports, which has helped me manage my stress. I feel happy when I play. Sports have become a real outlet for me. Today I’m still involved in Colorful Girls as a Volleyball Coach. I teach girls from the IDP camps how to play volleyball. It makes me happy and proud to meet them, get to know them, and to do what I am good at.

For girls who’ve experienced trauma and faced gender discrimination like us, playing volleyball is a way for us to take action. Being involved in Colorful Girls and learning through the Circles has helped us to deal with stress, learn about teamwork, and gain leadership skills. Learning to feel confident and have hope has been so important for us to be able to lead in our lives and help make change for other girls, too.
In the Circle, we would talk about how men and women could be equal. I had to think a lot and eventually, my views changed.

Thu Zar, 13
Buddhist Novice Nun,
Sagaing Region

Learning to feel confident and have hope has been so important for us to be able to lead in our lives and help make change for other girls, too.

Ji Mai, 18
IDP Camp, Kachin State

In the Circle, I learned that being a girl is okay. We don’t have to be depressed about it, or feel stressed about our lives.

Hay Mar, 15
Kwe Chan Village,
Tanintharyi Region
ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2018
2018 BY THE NUMBERS

- 3,900 girls enrolled in Colorful Girls Programs
- 6,000 copies of Wut Mon Magazine distributed to girls and alumnae
- 31 alumnae advance to project leadership
- 135 girl representatives at National Conference
- 135 girl representatives at National Conference
- 289,900 hours of structured programs
- 250 girls go to leadership camp
- 70 communities reached
- 2,450 girls playing sports
- 3,200 girls gather for Day of the Girl
- 6,000 copies of Wut Mon Magazine distributed to girls and alumnae
This year, our girls had 289,900 hours of direct structured programs specifically for them. This number represents a 100,000 hour increase over 2017, meaning that our programs continued to grow and reach more adolescent girls who can foster change.

In 2018, **3,900 girls** were involved in our regular weekly Colorful Girls Circles. Of those, **2,450 girls** also played and pushed themselves in Volleyball Circles. Year after year, the percentage of girls participating in Colorful Girls Circles who also join our Volleyball Circles has been rising. We see this as the result of advocacy efforts by our staff and the girls themselves, who really want to be involved despite the entrenched attitudes against girls playing sports often found in Burmese society.

In 2018 we made strides to ensure that all girls transitioned from the first to the second year of the Colorful Girls programming. Previously, local conditions often made it difficult for some girls to stay in the program. Of the Colorful Girls who are in school, they are at the age where they are making the transition from the 7th to the 8th grade. Because of the intensive exams in the 8th grade, many schools and parents do not allow them to participate in Circles.

Through continued advocacy with schools and parents, and by being more flexible with scheduling to allow more time for study around exam time, we have been able to ensure that more girls make it through both years. In the second year of our program, we dig deeper into topics important for maturing adolescents like goal setting, stress management, decision making, and healthy relationships. These skills are vital for girls navigating puberty and help them engage with their communities and society.

**Thirty one girls** advanced from having been in Colorful Girls Circles to doing other kinds of activities, including becoming Circle Co-Facilitators, Junior Coaches in the Volleyball Circles, Peer Researchers collecting evaluation data, and magazine committee members who edit, collect content for, and design Wut Mon magazine.

These advancements move power towards young women, offering them opportunities for leadership and decision making in a society which otherwise often overlooks their skills and potentials.

This year, we reached **70 communities**—10 more than 2017—in six regions and states across the country: Kachin State, Mandalay and Sagaing Regions, (Southern) Shan State, Yangon Region, and Tanintharyi Region. Our expansion came about mostly through referrals from local leaders, monks, and girls, who themselves asked for our programming to expand into their communities.

In 2018, we created and produced two more issues of Wut Mon “Pollinator” Magazine and distributed **6,000 copies** to girls and alumnae. Wut Mon is a by-girls, for-girls print publication where girls share art, poems, health information, political news, and inspiration. It is the only publication of its kind in the country and allows girls to talk to and learn from their peers across regions, ethnicity, and religion.
Girl Determined held three summer camps, with around 250 girls participating in all of them. Two camps focused on peacebuilding and diversity inclusion, and one on leadership and media. Camp participants came from regular Colorful Girls programs and must apply and be selected to come to camp. Criteria for selection include commitment to gender equity, social inclusion, and willingness to take action on these issues in their own communities.

Another set of gatherings were the 14 separate events Girl Determined led across the country for International Day of the Girl. Over 3,200 girls participated and worked to develop the National Girls’ Agenda. Later, 135 of these girls went on to join the Girls’ National Conference—a two-day conference held in Mandalay, the first of its kind in Myanmar—where the girl delegates built consensus around four main barriers that act to hold girls back.
In addition to our regular programming work, in 2018 we were particularly pleased to have led the following two special activities, and two girl activists from our programs received an international award.

**Developed a National Agenda**

To create an agenda for advocacy, Girl Determined hosted forums for girls around the country to talk about the challenges standing in the way of their rights. Through consensus, over 3,200 girls from 14 areas agreed upon a short list of local challenges. Then 135 girl representatives came together at a conference in Mandalay. Together they analyzed the barriers to their progress and chose the following four as key:

- Limited access to education and a supportive educational environment
- Feeling unsafe and not knowing how to respond to dangerous situations
- Feeling unable to make decisions and express opinions about their own lives
- And inadequate access to health and hygiene needs

This was the first step the girls took. They will present these barriers to members of Parliament in 2019, with the goal of having elected officials prioritize girls’ development in policy, legislation, and budgeting.

**Established the Girls’ Peer Research Unit**

In 2018, we started our Girls’ Peer Research Unit, made up of 12 young women who have completed our program and had an interest in developing data and analysis skills. The young women are aged 17-21, and represent diverse ethnic and language backgrounds. This year, the Unit gathered Colorful Girls program data. This initiative, in addition to training them in research methodology, quantitative surveys, research ethics, and organization, also helps them develop abstract thinking skills and gain practical experience. A few of the girls were especially skilled and so were trained in interviewing techniques. For us as an organization, the Unit provides us with better data collection, and also provides the young women with market-relevant skills.

**Lotus Leadership Award**

In February 2018, Girl Determined visited San Francisco for two young women leaders to accept the Lotus Leadership Award from The Asia Foundation. These awards recognize outstanding individuals and organizations that have made major contributions to the well-being of women and their communities in Asia. Ji Mai and Zar Chi Win, representing Colorful Girls across Myanmar, shared their personal stories of change and commitment to girls’ empowerment at a gala dinner together with the other Lotus Leadership Award winner, Abe Akie.

> I want girls to improve themselves. For example, if girls are afraid of people, they have to train themselves to be not afraid. **Girls must have confidence, communication skills, and not always be so ‘girly.’** If girls are humble when speaking to people, people will respect us and will presume that we should be equal.

**Ei Mon Htwe, 15**
Mandalay
Attending the Girls’ National Conference was my first ever trip to Mandalay. At the end of the conference, I was one of the four girls who got to present a main barrier issue topic; I spoke about girls’ voice and choice. When I returned home, I shared about my experience with my family.

~Poe Ei Phyu, 15
Dawei
After joining the GPRU in January 2018, the program’s coordinator had this to say about Win Win.

Win Win, age 20, grew up in a small village outside of Mandalay. After leaving school at age 14, she started weaving handbags and working on an assembly line at a camera production factory.

At the beginning of the GPRU training, she was slow and shy to speak up, but her open mindedness and friendliness quickly turned her into a most active participant. She was the first to reach out to the other participants from the Kachin IDP camps who were not as confident in their Burmese speaking skills, as Burmese is not a language they spoke growing up. Win Win saw everyone’s mistakes, including her own, as fun things to talk about. By making light jokes, she created a comfortable and fun environment for everyone. She also acted as a great negotiator in times of disagreements within the group as she listened carefully to all sides and helped them come to an agreement. In one activity, other members of the group expressed how her supportiveness helped reduce their worries. Her communication and social skills were incredibly useful to the program, which allowed her to team up with others who had lower levels of confidence, knowing that she would be supportive.
Achievements in 2018

Ji Mai and Zar Chi Win representing Colorful Girls with Emmy Award-winning broadcast journalist Sydnie Kohara at the Lotus Leadership Awards Gala
Never lose sight of the girl: Keep her at the center.
Girls are firmly at the center of our programming, in the sense that we first foster change at the individual level. When their understanding of who they are as people and members of society comes more clearly into focus, they can start to come together as a group to identify the factors in their lives—whether in society, in their community, in their religions or families—which are holding them back, limiting them, or disempowering them. Or, as they say in Burmese, “making them feel small.” At this point, the girls can see the similarity in factors across themselves as a group and can decide and work together to take action against these factors not only for themselves here and now, but for future generations of girls.

Our philosophy is never lose sight of the girl: Keep her at the center. We do not address directly the outside factors. Let the girls work out for themselves how best to address those factors from their position with a set of skills and perceptions which they can use in any situation, and no one can take away from them.
In the next years, we will continue to work on reaching the hardest-to-reach girls.
On the one hand, in terms of the girls and our programming, 2018 was a smooth year without any major upheavals or disruptions.

On the other hand, the quiet allowed us to reflect on the continuing challenges all the girls continue to face in their lives and their communities. Just some of these include continuing inter-ethnic and religious tensions; state sponsored and ethnic armed violence; and limiting and restrictive gender norms and a legal framework which largely ignores, dismisses or simply cannot see adolescent girls.

Then there are seemingly positive developments in the country, like economic development, which can carry particular risks for girls. For example, more girls are getting involved in domestic work, which means that girls are no longer in school and can be exposed to various forms of violence. They can become “hidden girls,” who can be hard to reach or hear from. Another kind of “hidden girl” are girls with disabilities, who can be prevented from engaging in regular social activities, sometimes even from leaving their own homes.

We have thought about the expanding media landscape, which is growing in content and the numbers of people gaining access. As adolescent girls have increasing points of contact with media in Myanmar, we continue to think of representation and control. Who represents girls? How are they represented? What are the possibilities for girls to represent themselves? We continue to have conversations about how girls can create their narratives, stories, and representations. Whatever happens, we want to work to ensure that girls are subjects in, and not the objects of, the media.

In the next years, we will continue to work on reaching the hardest-to-reach girls. These include girls involved in domestic work and girls with disabilities, as mentioned above, and migrant girls, girls who are out of school, and girls who, for various reasons, do not see themselves as being deserving of participation in our programming. These are the kinds of girls who we cannot always reach through the ways we are currently working. In all of our work, we do not want to recreate the social, ethnic, linguistic, and geographical hierarchies of wider society.

We want to keep the momentum of the Girls’ Agenda going to push advocacy for adolescent girls forward. As described earlier, the girls have come up with four key points which embody some of the main barriers they face. Our next step is to decide how to advance those four points or other related points into a girl-led advocacy strategy they can take to local and national elected officials, community and business leaders, and other powerholders.

We will also continue to develop pathways for girls’ leadership, including from within networks of alumnae girls. Many girls who have gone through our programs are able to go on to run Circles and Volleyball Circles themselves. This advancement includes opportunities for developing professional skills in management and learning how to plan and execute activities. Other pathways for development include alumnae becoming involved in the Girls Peer Research Unit, and by-girls for-girls media work.

We want to continue to build creative partnerships and coalitions that promote the interests of adolescent girls as a segment of society. Through our work, girls can learn skills through which they improve their own conditions, conditions in society, and make strides towards their own best interests as a group. The partnerships we seek are those which will foster the development of individual capacities and skills, while at the same time, contribute to girls’ own best interests as a whole.
**BOARDS AND DONORS**

Girl Determined benefits from the oversight of a Board of Directors with relevant technical and sector experience, and is further supported by a Myanmar-based advisory board in the development of Colorful Girls programs.

**Kirsten Gelsdorf**
Practitioner and teacher in the field of Complex Humanitarian Emergencies; Professor of Practice of Public Policy and Director of Global Humanitarian Policy at University of Virginia Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy.

**Cristy West**
Mixed media artist, philanthropist and founder of the Brimstone Award for Applied Storytelling at the National Storytelling Network.

**Andrea Menefee**
Expert in Nutrition and Food Security in Myanmar and Southeast Asia, and currently nutrition advisor to the Global Health Department of Save the Children US.

**Andrea Woodhouse**
World Bank Senior Social Development Specialist, with particular expertise in Myanmar and Fragile Political Environments and Countries in Transition.

**Dr. Mary Callahan**
Associate Professor of International Studies at the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington; political scientist with expertise in political reform and the military in Myanmar, and founding partner of Ava Advisory Group in Yangon.

**Brooke Zobrist**
Executive Director of Girl Determined and long-term expert and consultant in women and girls’ rights, education, and civil society development in Myanmar and Southeast Asia.
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Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom
Women Win International

“Programmes like yours are exactly what the SOL Foundation wants to support. Opportunities for the youth provided by passionate and dedicated people. Well done.”

Axel Bernhardt
SOL Foundation,
C.E.O. & Foundation Board Member

“It is great to see the girls were coming together and I observed that they personally also gain motivation for their future.”

Naw Lu Lue
Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom, Programme Officer
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“"It warms my heart to hear that Girl Determined is growing and still so successful.

Patricia Andersson
long-time friend and supporter

“"

Thanks for your awesome job in Myanmar!

Sophie Stone
member of Dining For Women Group NJ
Ways to continue to support:

Thank you for your generosity and we look forward to your ongoing support and encouragement. Your investments work to build strong, confident girls with character, that are working to change our world today and into the future.

Stay connected

Log onto our website at girldetermined.org to sign-up for our Girl Determined Newsletter, which brings analysis and stories from girls to you three times per year.

facebook.com/GirlDeterminedMM
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Keep donating

Visit our website to make a contribution - either a one-time contribution or a recurring, monthly gift. This type of support is critical to advancing our mission of girls’ leadership. It allows us to be certain we can respond quickly and effectively to shifts in the context and unexpected opportunities.

Send us an email at info@girldetermined.org to find out how to send checks, wires or stocks.

Contact us with creative fundraising ideas

We have had incredible couples collect donations instead of wedding gifts, and determined girls in the US launch a bead bracelet campaign. If you are interested in helping to raise funds in your communities, please reach out with your ideas and we can work together.

❤️ Support a girl
As per our robust child protection policy, the photos and stories in this report do not include the actual girls’ names or specific locations. This ensures anonymity and safekeeping of the girls with whom we work.

This annual report was produced by Girl Determined in 2019; all content was written by Girl Determined and Patrick McCormick, unless otherwise noted. Design and layout were provided by BRIDGE, a Yangon-based creative agency. Photographic images used throughout the report were obtained with permission and sourced by the following: Shwe Wutt Hmon (cover, p.11, and p.16), Andrew Stanbridge (p.4, p.5, p.6, p.7, portraits, p.14, p.17, p.19, p.21, p.22 and p.27), The Asia Foundation (p.8, map portraits, and p.18), and Mee Phyaw (p.9).