Using empowering methods to research empowerment? Peer research by girls and young women in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract

This chapter describes the establishment and achievements of a Girl-Led Research Unit in Kinshasa, involving 15 Congolese girls and young women with diverse backgrounds and life experiences. It discusses the benefits and challenges of a peer research approach in a context in which girls and young women navigate precarious circumstances to survive economically and socially. It also describes the longer-term impacts of these research experiences on policy and practice within the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Introduction

Between 2015-2017, the UK’s Department for International Development supported a programme called La Pépinière, which aimed to support the empowerment of girls and young women aged 10–24 years in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Kinshasa is a challenging urban context marked by the long-term absence of state services, corruption, high rates of unemployment, poverty, violence and gender inequalities, for example, relating to healthcare, educational attainment and decision-making power (DRC 2014, UNDP 2009, 2019). About half of Kinshasa’s inhabitants are under 20 years old, and the population has grown rapidly in recent years owing to rural exodus and conflict (UNDP and UN Women 2014). The city has been documented as a precarious, sometimes violent, environment in which the majority of Kinshasa’s inhabitants exercise multiple and creative forms of ‘débrouille’ (resourcefulness) to survive on a daily basis (Ayipam 2014).

La Pépinière translates broadly as ‘incubator’ or ‘greenhouse’ in the sense of nurturing plants to grow healthy and strong. As part of this programme, a Girl-Led Research Unit – or L’Unité des Fille Chercheuses in French – was established, comprising young women researchers who were recruited, trained and mentored to participate in and lead research and project design activities. The term fille (or girl) was chosen by the researchers and in this
context is commonly applied to young unmarried women and is not seen as pejorative. When *La Pépinière* was set up, the focus of most research and aid funding was on conflict and sexual violence in Eastern DRC and there was little information about the lives of girls and women in Kinshasa. The initial phase of the programme therefore focussed on conducting research on the everyday realities of girls and young women and the factors that enabled or constrained their economic and social empowerment. This research was intended to influence the policies and programmes of government, donors and civil society organisations (CSOs) to reflect the priorities expressed by young women.

This chapter describes the process of developing the Girl-Led Research Unit. It then examines the benefits and challenges of peer research in a fragile context in which girls and young women have to navigate precarious circumstances to survive.

**A girl-led peer methodology**

The development of the Girl-Led Research Unit was informed by literature on participatory research methods with children in non-Western contexts, such as the ‘children’s movement’ approach (Asselin and Doiron 2016) which advocates for girls and young women to have a central role in designing and conducting research about them. The first author and her Congolese counterpart (the programme’s Capacity Development Manager) believed that – if recruited from a diversity of backgrounds and locations – girls and young women working as peer researchers would access a wider diversity of research participants, be better placed than adult researchers to interview them about the realities of their lives (Porter 2016, Vaughn et al. 2018), and could benefit from the process themselves in terms of their own life journeys.

With support from local community-based organisations (CBOs) working with women and young people in four districts in Kinshasa province (Kimbunseke, Gombe, Bandalungwa, Kisenso), girls and young women interested in becoming researchers were identified. Following initial pre-selection days facilitated by these CBOs in each neighbourhood, 25 girls aged 16-24 years were invited to an agenda setting workshop in late May 2015 and engaged in a process to develop *La Pépinière’s* research priorities and questions. This workshop also supported the recruitment of an initial team of 16 researchers – four from each district – on the basis of their engagement and participation in the workshop, their availability to conduct the research and their access to diverse peer networks.
These 16 researchers reflected a diversity of backgrounds and life experience: four were aged 16-19 years, and 12 were aged 20-24 years; four were university students, nine were in secondary school and three were not in, or had never been to, school; five had jobs, working as a seamstress, a hairdresser and in small trading (petit commerce); eight were able to read and write in French and Lingala, three could speak and write Lingala and speak (but not write) limited French, and five were illiterate in both languages (could not read or write) and spoke Lingala only; two had children; 11 lived with one or both parents, and five lived with a sibling, cousin, aunt or other relative. The three co-authors of this paper are three of the girl researchers who took part in this process.

Training took place during a series of workshops – co-facilitated by the first author and the Capacity Development Manager – with the aim of engaging these young researchers in the full research cycle ‘in meaningful ways such as formulating the research questions, planning the methodology, collecting and/or analysing data, drafting recommendations and disseminating findings’ (Coad and Evans 2008, p. 43). Two initial workshops – each lasting three days – focused on brainstorming concepts, agreeing research questions, formulating interview guides, training the researchers in qualitative interviewing skills, discussing participants recruitment strategies and agreeing ethical protocols.

During the first workshop we co-developed interview guides covering themes such as the socio-economic circumstances of girls and young women (e.g. education, income generation); their decision-making power relating to education, work, home life and relationships; the influence of family, friends, organisations and role models in their lives; understandings of ‘empowerment’ and social and contextual factors that facilitate and impede these processes; and life aspirations. We also worked together to determine purposive sampling and appropriate data collection methods for research participants. We decided that the girl researchers would each conduct a series of 12 one-to-one semi-structured interviews over a four-week period. They each undertook a participatory analysis of their social networks to identify interviewees including younger girls, peers of a similar age, and adult men or women who were influential in the lives of girls within their local communities.

The second workshop focussed on interview practice and ethical considerations. Practice interviews were recorded and collectively analysed to identify and reflect on problems with how questions were asked and opportunities for improved probing and cross-checking. We
then undertook a pilot round of interviews with girls and young women and followed the same process. During a participatory risk analysis exercise, girl researchers brainstormed potential risks to themselves and others and we jointly devised mitigation strategies and ethical approaches to dealing with anticipated problems and difficulties.

Data collection took place after these two workshops, supported by a mentoring system whereby each team of four girl researchers was assigned an adult mentor – either from the University of Kinshasa or a local CSO – with a background in research and working with girls and young women. Working in pairs, four researchers met weekly with their assigned mentor to listen to and discuss interviews; receive coaching on how to further improve their interviewing technique; undertake and document (on paper or via audio recordings) initial analysis of interviews. During these meetings, the mentors led a group reflection process and documented weekly notes on the progress of each girl researcher, the key findings by theme and the group discussion.

In total, interviews were conducted with 117 young women aged 12–24 years and 60 influential adults (e.g. teachers, religious and community leaders, members of community-based organisations, and local business-women). Through a purposive sampling strategy, we reached a diversity of girls and young women, including those in education, work, combining the two, or struggling to earn an income; those living with parents, other family members or friends (rare) and those stigmatised because they engaged in sex work, transactional sex or were fille-mères (girl mothers). Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes, were conducted in Lingala (the majority language) or French, audio-recorded on smartphones and took place in private, quiet locations in homes, community spaces and cafés.

All interviews were transcribed and translated into French by two of the researchers (literate in French and Lingala) and the mentors. They were then double-coded – informed by a coding framework derived from the interview discussion guides and additional inductive codes identified from the data – by the first author and a junior researcher, with support from the Capacity Development Manager. Thematic analysis was then undertaken and further cross-referenced with the weekly analysis forms/audio from each girl researcher and the weekly notes from the research mentors to identify commonalities and discrepancies.
At this stage, the girl researchers participated in another two further three-day participatory data analysis workshops, with support from the mentors, first author and Capacity Development Manager. The first workshop focussed on training the girl researchers in data analysis skills, and engaged them in a systematic process of reviewing, checking and synthesising findings and discussing their implications for policy and practice. The second workshop focused on validation whereby the girl researchers presented the findings to the wider La Pépinière team. Thereafter, a study report was written (McLean-Hilker et al. 2016) and the girl researchers presented findings to representatives of government, donors and CSOs, and to community members in their neighbourhoods.

Several strategies were employed to ensure the full inclusion of all girl researchers in the process irrespective of differing literacy levels: the training and analysis workshops employed visual methods and were conducted in French and Lingala; the interview guides were produced in audio versions; and smartphones were used to record interviews. Each girl researcher understood and signed a formal letter of engagement, and received an appropriate daily stipend and subsistence for participation in the workshops, and a stipend per interview conducted. They were also given a monthly phone credit voucher and gifted the smartphone.

**Peer research findings**

Detailed research findings and recommendations are documented elsewhere (McLean-Hilker et al. 2016, McLean and Modi 2016). Here, we identify and reflect on those findings which would have been especially difficult to identify without the use of a peer research approach.

*Understanding ‘empowerment’*

While much debated, the term ‘empowerment’ can broadly be understood as a process during which individuals or groups experience enhanced social, political and economic power, agency or access to resources (Kabeer 1999, Lutrell et al. 2009). The word does not translate directly into French (*autonomisation* does not have the same meaning), nor Lingala. It was therefore important to understand local notions and ideas about ‘empowerment’ in Kinshasa according to girls’ and young women’s own definitions.
Understandings of empowerment among girls and young women were multi-faceted and not aligned with English or French definitions. During the research processes we identified and interrogated five terms in Lingala which were variously used to signify women with ‘autonomy’, ‘agency’, ‘independence’ and ‘power’. The first, mwasi malonga referred to a woman who was valued and respected in society as she had succeeded economically and socially, supported herself and others, and conformed with predominant social norms. Mwasi amikoka, on the other hand, referred to a woman who was capable, independent and economically self-sufficient. Grande dame referred to a woman with high status and profile, and who was capable, admired and valued. Mwasi elombe depicted a capable, ambitious and autonomous woman, who was self-sufficient, supporting herself and others. Finally, elombe mwasi referred to a dynamic, capable and physically powerful woman, who did not necessarily conform to social norms and was not necessarily well-respected by others.

Most girls and young women interviewed aspired to become a mwasi malonga who had economic self-sufficiency, independence from men and societal recognition as a capable, ‘useful’ and respected woman. Social integration and recognition were perceived to be as important as economic autonomy, and these required conforming to dominant social expectations about women’s behaviour. We found that interviewees with some economic autonomy had mostly received social support to achieve this: some had been helped by their family to study and had started working alongside their studies around the time of puberty; others had received start-up capital usually from a family member; and/or had received support from an older woman to ‘socialise’ them into a trade and associated networks.

Social norms and pressures

Interviewees described the social pressures they felt associated with the close policing of their behaviour, sexuality and fertility from the onset of puberty, both by their families and wider society. They described being categorised as either ‘good girls’ or ‘bad girls’, with a girl’s life chances dependent on being bien vu (well-regarded) in society. Good girls were seen as polite, respectful, ‘serious’ and soumise (submissive) to family and community expectations. They dressed conservatively; spent time productively studying, working or praying; avoided boys and pre-marital sex; married well; and became good wives and mothers by supporting their family economically and contributing to society.
A girl could quickly get a reputation as a bad girl if she was impolite, disrespectful and légère (easy), if she dressed in tight clothes, spoke her mind, was seen with boys, or gave birth to a child outside marriage:

They always think badly of girls. If they see you chatting with boys, they expect you to get pregnant and stop your studies ... My paternal uncle can come to the house and if he sees me in shorts or a mini-skirt, he thinks that I have started love affairs with men.

(Girl interviewee, 14 years)

Girls that are said to be less serious include Mitu etoka nzinzi [those with flies in their heads], bana boya toli [those who refuse advice], likolo likolo [in the air, in the air]. Those who dress badly – short dress, bare back, belly button on the outside ... transparent neckline, underwear showing, bad characters, impolite ...

(Man interviewee, 34 years)

It was variously assumed – whether true or not – that a bad girl was having sexual relationships with many men to earn money, spending her time unproductively or in the wrong type of work. Such girls experienced unkind gossip, rejection by their friends and family and, sometimes, exclusion from community spaces such as schools and churches.

Girls and young women are perceived as personally responsible for meeting, or falling short of dominant expectations. However, these expectations are out-of-step with a social reality in which many young women are expected to contribute money to households once they reach puberty; where men and boys pressure young women to have sexual relations and often use money and gifts to persuade them, and where sexual and reproductive health services are simply not accessible to unmarried girls and women. Few adult interviewees recognised how such social and economic pressures influenced young women’s lives and the challenges, risks and obstacles young women face in trying to meet social expectations.

_Precarious life experiences_

Research findings suggested that most young women in their teenage years were ambitious about their future. Girls variously aspired to find a ‘good job’ as a doctor, businesswoman, lawyer, seamstress or journalist; to become ‘rich and famous’; and/or be ‘useful’ and help others in society. Yet interviewees aged over 18 years described how their self-confidence could plummet after the completion of their studies and the pressure they felt to get married. While most girls and young women aspired to marry – and gain the social status associated
with being a married woman – many feared constraints on their time, mobility and decision-making power, as well as the violence and lack of partner support that marriage could bring.

It is the possessive man ... the man who sees the woman as a baby maker, a housewife ... not someone who can look him in the eyes and say ‘not this’. My aunt, for example, has a car and wants to learn to drive, but her husband insists on taking a chauffeur as he does not want to see her at the wheel ... why? He does not want to see an emancipated woman who can take the steering wheel and go anywhere without him knowing ... It is men who are a brake on women’s emancipation.

(Young woman interviewee, aged 24)

In this respect, it was striking that few of the older women role models the interviewees referred to as ‘empowered’ and ‘successful’ were married.

Young women’s accounts also described the precarious nature of life for girls and young women in Kinshasa where there were few social or economic safety nets. Even for those who appeared to be progressing socially and economically, life chances could change rapidly as the result of the loss of a parent, illness in the family (and the associated medical expenses), becoming pregnant, or having their money or goods stolen.

Reflections on the peer research process

New skills and competencies for researchers

A core focus of this project was to help girls to develop new skills and competencies (see Porter 2016, Vaughn et al. 2018). In collaboration with each young woman, we therefore developed individual capacity development plans – covering personal and research skills and capacities – which were reviewed on a regular basis by the research mentors. Examples included organisational skills (e.g. the ability to plan interviews and manage time, and participate in agreed training and mentoring sessions); problem solving skills (e.g. the ability to manage unexpected circumstances and adapt to local realities); communication and social skills (e.g. communicating and maintaining good relationships with research participants and colleagues); and qualitative research skills (e.g. semi-structured interviewing, understanding and applying ethical guidelines, and data analysis).

Audio and video testimonies were collected from the girl researchers at various stages of the process – after research training, following the completion of this first study, and at the end
of the first phase of La Pépinière project two years later – and demonstrated positive changes in researchers’ personal and professional capacities (McLean-Hilker et al. 2016), including in organisational skills, research and listening skills, self-awareness, confidence to participate in group discussions; relationship-building and collaborative skills; and open-mindedness towards others of different backgrounds and views. The names of girl researchers below are pseudonyms.

The project has helped me to know the lives of other girls. I might have had my own ideas, but now I understand their own ideas… I also learned how to ask good questions, how to put people at ease.

(Evelyne, 16 years old, November 2015)

By becoming a girl researcher, I also learn a lot myself and this helps me to progress today, tomorrow, or in the future. It has helped be to become more knowledgeable … and I now know what I am capable of by myself.

(Trinité, 24 years old, November 2015)

Wider economic and social impact on peer researchers

In September 2018, we collected further testimonies from several girl researchers about how their involvement in the peer research and La Pépinière programme had affected their lives. The testimonies demonstrate how involvement in peer research work can contribute to longer-term positive changes.

In addition to receiving a small stipend during this first study, the researchers were supported by their mentors and the Capacity Development Manager to invest these funds into specific projects which they felt could help them economically and/or socially. Some paid secondary school or university fees for themselves or a sibling; one set up a small stall selling food and joined a likelemba group savings and loans group; two others began to trade in clothing, bags and shoes, or jewellery; one started selling telephone credit and one expanded her hairdressing business.

Beforehand, I did a little small trading, but I didn’t save… with La Pépinière, I started to understand how to save… now I have opened a shop where I sell playstations and telephones... I see that I am autonomous now. I have decision-making power. If I say no, it’s no… I am saving for doing more studying… I want to restart university… La Pépinière really trained me…
In line with the vision to ensure the participation of girls and young women throughout the programme, 15 girl researchers also continued their involvement with La Pépinière beyond this first study. This included roles as co-researchers and research assistants on other studies conducted by the programme, for example with a Congolese partner research organisation, CERED-GL. Several researchers also took on roles in the monitoring and support teams for the pilot empowerment projects undertaken by the programme. One girl researcher eventually secured a job with CERED-GL:

Professionally, I gained competencies that I did not have before… now I have a job with CERED-GL. I learned about writing reports and how to explain their purpose to others… I learned so many things from La Pépinière which have made me who I am today.

(Rita, 26 years old, September 2018)

In September 2018, eight of the girl researchers were working to establish their own organisation to offer advice to Congolese and international organisations on programmes and policies for girls and young women. Each was paying a small amount into a core fund from their own income generating activities to support the set-up process. They were in the process of setting up an advisory board, had already been engaged to support two projects and were regularly consulted by NGOs and donor agencies.

At the start, I didn’t know anything about my capacities and how I could earn for myself… Then I realised I could do this work and develop professional capacities at the same time as studying... I have continued to progress… I was hired for one project to accompany children through a research process… I have been invited to many trainings… people want my opinion now… I have been consulted many times … sometimes voluntary, sometimes paid…

(Prudence, 21 years old, September 2018)

Socially, within family and friendship networks, researchers reported changes in the ways they were perceived by others.

I now have a team of sisters … I can call them if I have a problem… I can count on them… a sort of family has been created… In my [own] family, now I am considered highly… my father now calls me as well as my brothers to ask advice... this never
happened before… With my friends, they see that I work, they see my pictures on Facebook… I get respect… My uncle has changed how he speaks to me – he now speaks with respect… At the personal level, I have learned how to manage my time… I improved my Lingala… I can now talk in front of a crowd… I have no fear to approach someone and talk to them.

(Betty, 25 years old, September 2018)

One researcher – Félicité (pseudonym) – could not read or write and spoke Lingala and no French when we recruited her in May 2015. Her father had died when she was young and at the start of the project she was living with her mother in a poor area of Kinshasa and working as a hairdresser to earn income. Despite these challenges, Félicité proved to be one of the best peer researchers and by the end of the initial three-month research period – with the support of other members of the group – she had already started to read and write a little and speak some French. She then used her stipends to pay for a training course in sewing and set up a successful business. When we met her again in 2018, she had increased her income and reflected:

Before La Pépinière, I didn’t know who I was and what I could do in life… then I learned that even if I was a ‘girl-mother’, my life was not ruined and I could still do something… I became an example for other girls in my family and my neighbourhood… I was on TV and showed other girls and other people what was possible even for a girl-mother and this gave hope… Through La Pépinière, I developed my capacities to be a role model and a mentor for other girls… I developed my business and looked after my brothers and sisters… In the neighbourhood, many families send their girls to me for advice and mentoring… I also work in the neighbourhood, so women know their rights.

(Félicité, 23 years old, September 2018)

Managing research ‘quality’

Concerns about the reliability, validity and credibility of data collected and analysis carried out by people who are not qualified researchers are well documented (e.g. Vaughn et al, 2018). In this study, we used a number of approaches to enhance research quality.

First, the process of training the researchers and piloting interviews was intensive, comprising a step-by-step participatory process as described above. Second, weekly mentoring during the data collection process helped to troubleshoot problems, answer
questions, hone and improve the researchers’ interviewing and analysis skills on an ongoing basis. Girl researchers could also call their research mentor at any time to get support and advice. Third, the data analysis process was multi-stage and multi-faceted. The scripts were double coded by the first author, a junior researcher and the Capacity Development Manager and analysed separately by the girl researcher teams with their mentors. During the coding process, the team discounted or treated with caution any responses to leading questions and any inconsistent findings. In the two data analysis workshops, the first author, Capacity Development Manager and mentors co-analysed data patterns and key findings and worked with the girl researchers to check for inconsistencies and negative cases which did not fit emerging trends.

Undertaking these steps to enhance the quality of data when using a peer research approach does entail relatively intensive support to the researchers, including a degree of on-the-job learning through mentoring and support. However, as with any research study, care is required to design the training, data collection methodology and analysis processes to minimise sources of bias and maximise validity of study findings and conclusions.

In this case, the authors are confident that the peer research approach was vital to this study, to the nature, depth and quality of the data collected, the contextual interpretation of the findings and the recommendations formulated. Without the girl researchers, it would have been difficult to access a diversity of girls and young women – especially those hard-to-reach and social excluded such as sex workers. Moreover, in this context, it is unlikely that girls and young women would have talked so openly about sensitive issues around intimate relationships and sexual and reproductive health with adults or people they did not know.

Managing risk

Peer research approaches are not free of risk. Becoming a ‘peer researcher’ can shift an individual’s sense of who they are, according them new powers and privileges, and affect their relationships with friends, families and communities (Devotta et al. 2016, Porter 2016). We attempted to anticipate this through a participatory risk assessment with the researchers during the second research training workshop.
One risk identified was linked to each researcher having a smartphone to record interviews and communicate with the rest of the team. The phones provided were not expensive, but in the milieu where many researchers lived, they were luxury items girls would not normally have access to. The girls predicted that their possessing such a phone might trigger questions and gossip about their involvement in a research project involving outsiders – in particular white Europeans. They said that family and community members might assume that they were being paid a lot of money and start to pressure them. We therefore undertook some safety training around how the researchers could talk about their involvement in *La Pépinière*, and when and how they would conduct interviews and safely use their smartphone. For example, they agreed never to use their phones in public spaces in the neighbourhood, to only conduct interviews in their home, cafés or community spaces.

Despite this, during the pilot work, a researcher – Marie – had her smartphone stolen by her mother’s boyfriend and when she tried to retrieve it, he smashed it and threatened her. Marie’s mentor – a trained support worker from the local CBO – learned that Marie regularly suffered abuse from her mother and boyfriend and helped connect her to support services. Despite this, Marie realised that her involvement in the project would worsen her situation and opted to withdraw.

Félicité’s story also illustrates the jealousies and pressures a peer researcher can be subjected to as a result of a change in personal situation. Her experiences as a peer researcher attracted the interest of an international organisation that was making a TV series about courageous young women. Félicité was invited to tell her story as part of the series:

Due to the TV programme, I had some problems. The people who had testified about me thought that I was paid for that but I wasn’t… they thought I had earned money and not given them anything… These people even went to the police to accuse me of taking all the money without thinking of them… They wouldn’t believe that I volunteered for this… They even got lawyers involved… and I had to move to a different commune to get away from the harassment… I tried to find the cameramen who had filmed so they could testify for me, but they weren’t in Kinshasa any more… I stayed away from the neighbourhood a long time and just now I am moving back again.

We asked her if she wished that she had not got involved with the peer research:
Despite this, if I had the opportunity again, I would not refuse to do it… I would do it again over and over again. It has changed my life for the better.

Testimonies such as these show how an individual’s involvement in peer research can affect their life in both positive and negative ways. They highlight key ethical responsibilities during a peer research processes and suggest that risk management processes could also be supplemented by engaging with family and community members of young researchers to prepare the ground for their involvement.

**Longer-term impacts of peer research**

The peer research process and research outputs have led to positive impacts which reach beyond the lives of the girl researchers themselves. Over the 30-month project, we witnessed how *La Pépinière’s* researchers became change agents in their families, communities and wider societies. Their work enabled Congolese and international organisations to recognise girls and young women as capable, skilled and resilient actors, acknowledge the specific situation and needs of this demographic, and develop new initiatives, policies and programmes to support them. A senior ministry official, for example, said,

> I saw the development of the Girl-Led Research Unit from the onset... I was really impressed by the capacities of these adolescent girls and young women, especially those who were illiterate. The programme did an amazing job of training them and building their capacities. These girls showed that even if they could not read or write, that they could learn how to do research and do good research… I saw these girls develop their self-confidence. There were some who were afraid to speak at the beginning and then, through the training, learned to do research, analyse issues and express themselves and stand up in front of government officials and donors and talk about the lives of girls in Kinshasa... They did really good research, showing us the difficulties that young girls face in their lives, how much pressure they are under, but also how hard they work… It really changed things for many people in government to see young girls stand up and give their analysis so confidently... We realised that they were a really important group to consult....

(Senior official, Ministry of Gender, Family and Children, DRC)

Following the initial peer research and the dissemination of the research findings in different fora in Kinshasa, international and local organisations started to engage the girl researchers, as well as other girls and young women, in their programme teams and approaches. For
example, a Save the Children project was informed by the peer research approach and results of *La Pépinière* and it recruited four of the girl researchers to train and mentor 10-14 year olds to conduct peer research on sexual and reproductive health for one of their programmes. A local NGO called Search for Common Ground engaged girl researchers to design a new programme for young people in Kinshasa with a focus on social and political empowerment.

In 2017, as a result of the research, the Ministry of Gender consulted the project’s researchers and other girls and young women on the priorities for the new Government of DRC National Action Plan on Security Council resolution 1325 (Women, Peace and Security) leading to a development of a special annex to the plan on girls and young women.

I was so impressed with the capabilities of these young women from *La Pépinière*… so I invited five girl researchers and other young women to a consultative workshop to work on the new National Action Plan on 1325. We developed a special annex on the need and priorities of girls and women and then managed to put some objectives and language in the main National Action Plan. This is the first National Action Plan in Africa to explicitly refer to the needs of girls and young women.

(Senior official, Ministry of Gender, Family and Children, DRC)

**Conclusion**

Over the last decade, there has been growing recognition of the important role that girls and young women can play as researchers and advisors in the development of new policies and programmes. Although lauded for their focus on women’s and girls’ capacities, some approaches have also been subject to substantial critique, including the way they can instrumentalise, pressure and disempower girls and young women (see Batliwala 2007, Gonick et al. 2009, Koffman and Gill 2013).

The risks and challenges experienced by some of the peer researchers in this study reinforce the need to work with peer researchers to carefully develop ethical and practical procedures to enhance the safety of their participation. These should ensure young people employed in research roles are aware of the potential risks and benefits of their involvement, are given the opportunity to make their own choices, and are supported to participate safely, develop new skills and enhance career opportunities through the research.
Experience with the *La Pépinière* project has demonstrated that, with adequate training and mentoring, girls and young women – including those with limited literacy skills – can co-lead research design, data collection and data analysis processes, and produce good quality, credible qualitative research findings. Moreover, it shows that peer research approaches can access data that would be difficult to obtain through other study designs, enabling access to hard-to-reach groups and in-depth interviewing about sensitive subjects. Finally, peer research approaches can have a significant positive impact on the lives of those trained as peer researchers, as well as others around them, be these family and community members or individuals and organisations with the power to change policy and practice.

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