



BUILDING A WORLD WHERE GENDER EQUITY REIGNS

# 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

**CHOOSE YOURSELF**



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# 1. FOREWORD

ChooseYourself has successfully nailed 2021, and the entire team is excited to share with you how this journey has been. I have to start by admitting it was for everyone in the team to ensure the organization's success despite the pandemic as the whole world is living it. Therefore, we took the challenges as learning opportunities to strengthen our team & our organization.

I highly take this moment to acknowledge, congratulate and applaud each CY's team member who made this journey successful:

- From ensuring the most significant expansion to ever happen in the history of our dear organization to 6 more newest African Countries in the Girl Talk Program, as well as continuing coordinating the program regionally
- To equipping social & financial leadership skills to 20 and more francophone & anglophone African women through the amazing Grow With Us Fellowship
- To contribute to the social well-being of young immigrants in Maine.
- Finally, facilitating the empowerment of women refugees by giving them free access to education and financial security thanks to our Home Away from Home program operating in the Nakivale refugee settlement in Uganda.

Nevertheless, this work couldn't have been possible without the support of our generous donors and partners. We remain grateful.

I hope that this report pushes all of us to continue fighting for a world where gender equity reigns.



## 2.OVERVIEW OF 2021



When we started ChooseYourself, our primary goal was to shift the power to the hands of young people and show the world that young women are capable of shaping their communities for their wellbeing. For the past five years, building this organization has been about trusting that young women and girls know exactly how to address the racial and patriarchal violence they endure—then powering them to contribute to their economic and social power.

In 2021, our programs expanded:

- **Girl Talk Afrique** added six more countries to the feminist movement building, making it a Pan-African program stretching 12 countries. In addition, we piloted digital organizing as one way of keeping our communities exchanging, unpacking, and sharing experiences. Girl talk Digital was started as a monthly online space that hosts conversations on the status of women and girls per country. In addition, a private Facebook group made of 116 young feminists from west francophone African countries was put in place by our francophone coordinator to maintain and sustain the momentum of young feminist organizing in francophone countries.
- **Grow with us fellowship** became a bilingual program. The team welcomed young women entrepreneurs from francophone African countries as fellows to the program. In addition, we added new mentors who spoke French and committed the program to operate bilingually.



- **Our community integration program** in Maine hosted its first retreat for African women immigrants. The "Love is healing" retreat was initiated as a rejuvenating four-day weekend away for young African women immigrants part of community building in Maine to rest together, build a stronger sorority, and reflect on the work they do.
- **Home away from Home** thrived in 2021. We went to the youth with the books to encourage them to keep reading even during the lockdown regardless of the covid restrictions that pushed our library to close its doors for half of the year.

The most exciting part of 2021 was the capacity growth that the team embraced. Everyone in their capacity was innovative enough to adjust to the pandemic and new ways of serving our communities.

# 3. COMMUNITY INTEGRATION IN MAINE

Since the pandemic started, Girl Talk in Maine switched to online organizing. In 2021 we hosted a range of essential conversations that cater to the experiences of Immigrant youth:

- **On February 5th, with MANA( Maine Association for New Americans) and Planned Parenthood of New England,** we hosted a conversation on the aftermath of sexual assault: Road to recovery. Some of the interesting quotes from the conversations are:  
“ Conversations like this one are important. They remind us that awareness is critical. When survivors come across this, they know that they can also seek help/support”  
~Dr. Abbie Yamamoto, ED, Maine association for new Americans



- **On February 28th,** We co-hosted a round table conversation on anti-racism with Bowdoin College and the University of Southern Maine. A quote from the conversation:” We must actively challenge the work being done in Maine and its legacy of being one of the least diverse states through open talks/discussions in schools as well as independent medium

With the support of Grantmaking of colors and Maine humanities, the team in Maine created and hosted the retreat: “The Love is Healing retreat,” free of charge, which happened in Newry, Maine. The retreat was created for women of color to take a step back from their busy lives to rest, reflect, and be in a space designed to exist. We had team-building activities that included yoga and book discussions facilitated by members of the Maine community. It was a successful retreat that left participants happy and rejuvenated. We hope this is the start of many more retreats in the future.

On September 18th, we hosted our first Maine Immigrant youth conference. The conference had five sessions important to the experiences of Immigrant youth: Mental health, restorative justice, LGBTQ immigrant youth realities, and financial stability. This conference was created as a space for immigrant youth to unpack and strategize about community building in Maine.



# 4. GIRL TALK AFRIQUE ANGLOPHONE

**Girl Talk Afrique** is a program that offers safe spaces to diverse groups of women in different African countries to gather and share experiences. The program is also set up to cultivate collaborative care and healthy sisterhoods of women ready to end the culture of being silenced and erased, ready to be heard, seen and acknowledged in all their diversities. At Girl Talk, we recognize the importance of community organizing that allows women to know how internalized sexism and stereotypes can be dismantled and re-imagine a world where they are free, safe, and supported. Women are the agents of change in their respective communities from these safe spaces.



In 2021, **Girl Talk Afrique Anglophone** continued to expand even more in 2021 to three countries; Tanzania, Nigeria, and Malawi. At the beginning of 2021, two staff members visited each of these countries to learn more about the feminist organizing scene and connect with different feminist individuals and organizations. This initial visit helped identify and build relationships with diverse young grassroots organizations such as Tanzania Feminist Collective, Pro-Choice Nigeria, and Young Feminists Network in Malawi. As a result, we collaborated with these organizations, pooled resources together, and started Girl talk spaces in their countries.





In Uganda, we had essential discussions on what feminist representation looks like in politics and another on safe abortion. In addition, we listened to Ugandan feminists doing incredible work within the healthcare industry. One of the key takeaways from our panelist, an Afrikan Feminist lawyer and organizer in Uganda, shared that agency is a critical component in this conversation. Still, it starts from providing the correct information and fighting systems that would rather have women not fully exist.

*"Bodily agency also means women being able to walk to pharmacies to buy condoms, lubricants, etc. It has the choice to make health and sexual choices" ~Girl Talk Uganda Panelist.*




Our first Girl Talk in Tanzania introduced feminist intersectional theory & praxis to reach young interested activists. In this Girl Talk, we focused on exploring radical approaches that demand a togetherness on the upheaval of patriarchal, colonialism, white supremacist, and the homophobic status quo in Tanzania. The second Girl Talk conversation was about strengthening feminist organizing by redefining communal care and sisterhood outside the patriarchal standards. We heard from the Founder of Tanzania Feminist Collective sharing how and why it's essential to decenter men in our work. She said, *"We live in a society of staunch heteronormative beliefs which ensure assigned genders at birth are followed. We can therefore start with interrogating gender roles, encouraging young children to take up different responsibilities regardless of gender, and most importantly, as we are all continuously unlearning, it is on us to practice empathy and care within our communities."*



In 2021, we had a fundamental objective of organizing with specific marginalized focus groups. This was perfectly exemplified by organizing community spaces with LGBTQ+IA in Rwanda. The laws in Rwanda fail to specifically support homosexuality by recognizing only marriages between a man and woman, implying a limitation on sexual behavior between consenting same-sex partners. This ambiguity has reinforced extreme social violence towards LGBTQ folks. Therefore, it was crucial to ensure a safe and private space for queer people by maintaining anonymity on the webinar to come together, share their grievances, and connect with others to strategize around the kind of change they deserve.



We hosted three Girl Talks in schools and universities in Zambia, focusing on ending rape culture and the available SHRH services. Our Girl talk ambassadors are the community leaders and champions of advocating for Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights to young adults in secondary schools and universities during these conversations. They educate them on bodily agency, contraception methods, consent,, and unlearning rape culture. This approach was grounded in providing knowledge on the available sexual health services like contraception methods, the policies in favor and organizations supporting women and overall how this mobilization can eventually influence policies in Zambia.



And in **Kenya**, we organized a very intimate workshop with **sex workers on sexual violence & the available sexual health services**. Our guest speaker advised journalists, saying, "One of the guiding principles for journalists, much like doctors, should be not to harm. Media houses should hire more women because they are best placed to report women's issues. Prioritize women and their stories in news cycles. The media also need a definite stand when reporting rape, sex, and gender-based violence; otherwise, we risk a casual stance and generic way of reporting these stories."

Lastly, the expansion to new countries came with the growth of the Girl Talk team that initially comprised 12 volunteering members to 21 members by the end of the year. The Girl Talk team also participated in a writing project for the Journal report publication. It consisted of writing reviews about organizing in each African country and exploring crucial topics in their communities. The Pan-Africanist journal report, which is soon to be published in 2022, was among the activities that enabled the team to collaborate, grow, and learn from each other.

# 5. GIRL TALK AFRIQUE FRANCOPHONE

In 2021, the **Girl Talk program** underwent many bold and necessary changes. One of those was the expansion into three French-speaking African countries. **Benin, Ivory Coast, DRC (Goma and Kinshasa)** have started hosting Girl Talk conversations. Let's look at how this happened and how it has impacted how the program will go this year 2022.

**Girl Talk Afrique Francophone** is a program that aims to strengthen the feminist movement in Francophone Africa. The program builds safe spaces for diverse groups of young women to humanize their experiences, exchange ideas, enhance sisterhood, build the language and discourse to challenge patriarchy, and strategize and organize to create change within their communities. By change, we mean the abolition of systems of women's oppression, and the social, economic, and political liberation for all women, dignified and safe life for them.

There is an almost popular misconception about feminist movements in Francophone Africa that they do not exist. However, there are concrete actions in Francophone African countries led by young feminists. There are challenges of visibility and connection so that these movements can become solid in driving the social change they aim for. That is why our first step in 2021 under the leadership of the Executive Director was to organize narrative workshops and meetings with young feminists in Benin, Ivory Coast, and DRC. It allowed us to see the existing movements and discuss how the Girl Talk program can be contextually relevant to their expectations and needs.



After this step, we organized **Girl Talk conversations in these countries**. Two **Girl Talk conversations** were held in **Benin**, all in physical presence. In **Côte d'Ivoire**, two **Girl Talk conversations** were held, one online and one in person. In the **DRC**, **Girl talk conversations** were also held in **Goma** and **Kinshasa** in physical presence. Finally, In **Burundi**, two **Girl talk conversations** happened online.

All these spaces were on various themes. For example, we can mention:

- introduction to **Feminism in theory and practice**;
- From digital activism to field actions: community work of the Ivorian League of Women's Rights for the elimination of **Gender-Based Violence**;
- How to recognize and deconstruct sexist stereotypes?
- Culture of consent: learning, understanding, and addressing sexual consent.



We collaborated with **local/national feminist organizations** such as **Ligue Ivoirienne des Droits des Femmes**; **Jeunes Filles Actrices de Développement (JFAD)**; **Uhuru Knowledge Center** and **BOLD**.

From the first months of organizing **Girl Talk in Francophone Africa**, we received **messages from young feminists** in **Mali**, **Cameroon**, **Burkina Faso** who wanted the program to happen. So we discussed it with them. It is a solid signal that it is time to **connect the feminist movements in Francophone Africa**. As a result, **Girl Talk Afrique Francophone** set up a team of coordinators and ambassadors in the four countries mentioned.

We also created a Facebook group for all feminists in the Francophone sub-region called **Girl Talk Afrique Francophone Powering Young Feminist Movement**. That's the plan for the program in 2022: how to connect, empower and strengthen feminist movements in their various works. We will focus on themes such as: eliminating rape culture, reproductive justice, and intersectional Feminism.

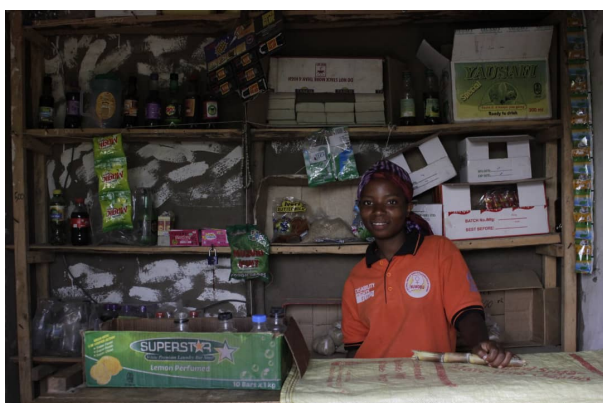
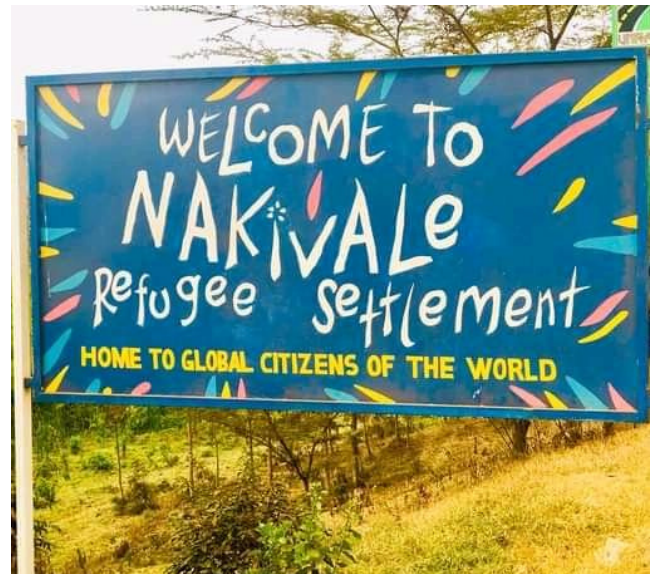
We look forward to continuing this work this year. In the meantime, get a sense of the status of women and girls in the countries where Girl Talk takes place and the work of the Girl Talk program in those countries by reading the **Girl Talk Journal report** that we wrote last year but will be published in March.



# 6.HOME AWAY FROM HOME

The **Nakivale Refugee Settlement**, where we operate, is the 8th most significant refugee settlement worldwide, located in the **southwest of Uganda** closer to the Tanzanian border and hosts **139,343 refugees** from different African countries. However, even though they have an estimated **185 km<sup>2</sup>** of land allocated to the refugees, a refugee camp is no place for a woman: being a woman in a refugee camp creates double the exposure and risk one to dangers such as rape, forced prostitution, unwanted pregnancies, arranged marriages, gender-based violence, etc.

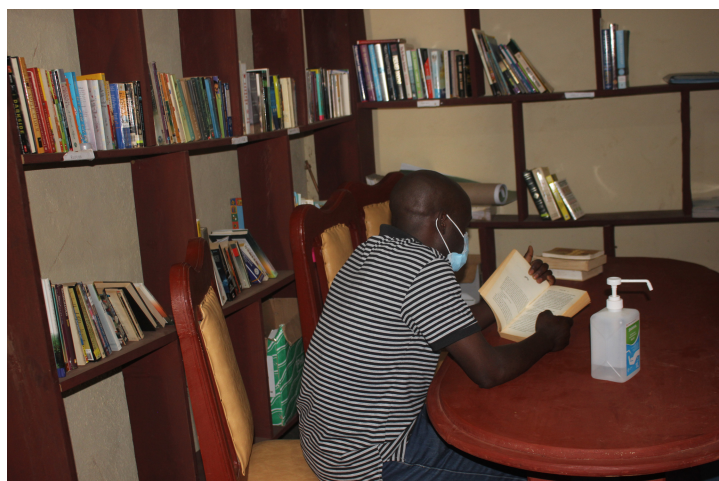
Our mission at ChooseYourself has over the years been about building a safe world for women by fighting for gender equity without leaving anyone behind. We uphold this mission in our Home Away from Home program for refugee women and girls. The program offers them all the facilitation needed to be socially and economically integrated into their host community. We do this through our three main projects established under the program.



## OUR COMMUNITY LIBRARY.

One of the challenges women/girls refugees face is the lack of education due to financial deficits. Therefore, the Home Away from Home program initiated a community library as an educational hub for women and girls at the camp. Through this library, they have access to books and join other academic activities as a way of building an appropriate education foundation and ensuring they have no gaps as they await to rejoin formal schooling.

In 2021, despite the pandemic, the library managed to welcome 500 refugees, among them 150 children, 250 teenagers, and 100 adults. All were coming from different regions of the Nakivale Refugee settlement: Main Base Camp, Juru, Rubondo, and Kabazana. In October 2021, we started a book reading club called Nice and Shop with 20 members. The majority are young girls between the ages of 13-16 who come from Burundi, DRC, Somali, and Sudan. The club's goal is to improve their reading & writing skills in English and verbal skills through debates organized in the club. The book club was necessitated by a challenge we identified. Uganda being an anglophone country made it difficult for many of our beneficiaries who can't speak local English to fully integrate within the hosting community. We believe that the book club will help mitigate the language barrier.





## EDUCATION REINFORCEMENT

Within the refugee community: **most girls aren't prioritized in accessing education** because of **financial problems** and the **attitude and beliefs held by the population**, who still prioritize educating their sons over their daughters. In 2021, we sponsored some of them by **covering their school fees**. We also **provide a tutor to help them improve on certain class subjects** they are struggling with and prepare for their exams or assist with their homework to ensure a **successful educational journey**.



## ENTREPRENEURSHIP TRAINING

**Empowering women through financial literacy** is key in ensuring they can provide for their basic needs and are **economically liberated**. Unfortunately, **financial hardships are a reality most women face in a refugee camp**. Those who dare to start small businesses end up closing because of a lack of experience. Therefore, we initiated entrepreneurship training facilitated by the **Kisoboka Africa organization**. Ten young women refugees received six months of intense training, preparing them to start their businesses and adequately maintaining their businesses to be financially transformed.

The 2021 entrepreneurship training ended with a graduation ceremony where all ten successfully graduated with certificates of completion and received seed funding for their businesses. In 2022, 10 new businesses will be created and fully operating thanks to the knowledge acquired from the training.



The uniqueness of this program is based on a belief that **women refugees know their needs and can find solutions among themselves through the program**. For this reason, our team on the ground is composed of refugee women who strategize and implement the activities required to **change the lives of their fellow women refugees**. We are very grateful for their hard work and effort that has made the Home Away from Home program successful in achieving its primary goals during 2021. Admittedly, it wasn't an easy fit considering the pandemic, but our team managed to complete all the mentioned milestones.



# 7. GROW WITH US FELLOWSHIP (GWU)



**Grow With Us Fellowship (GWU)** is a program whose central vision is to equip young African women entrepreneurs with the necessary tools to create and run successful ventures. Since its inception, the GWU program has already welcomed **24 young women from 17 countries**, and most of these women were from Anglophone Africa.

However, during the past year, we received the first participants from Francophone African countries such as **Benin(3), Niger(1), Burkina Faso(1)**. In contrast, the Anglophone cohort joined us from **Rwanda(1), Kenya(1), Namibia(1), Ghana(1), Nigeria(1)**. The program begins from March until late October/Early November, and during this time, the participants are taken through intensive mentorship by Mentors who are experts in various industries.

The lessons span from understanding oneself as an entrepreneur to topics such as Marketing for a startup, fundraising, and achieving economic justice on the continent. The learning sessions take place once a month on a Saturday and are usually very interactive, whereas both parties find themselves learning from each other. In addition, fellows regularly write on their experiences within the program. Here is an example of **Marian Nwaokolo**, Nigerian, and part of the 2021 cohort <https://bit.ly/35uZHJ4>. Occasionally, book reading sessions are organized for the fellows, and according to feedback received from the fellows, this is an activity they enjoy.



In 2021, for the first time since its inception, **Grow With US Bootcamp** was organized and successfully conducted in Zambia. The main goal behind organizing the boot camp was to allow the participants to meet each other and the mentors who had accompanied them for the duration of the program. Therefore, the **Fellows** could learn from each other and the mentors in attendance for three days. The topics covered during the boot camp included market research, pitching one's ideas, and running a business with a feminist ideal.

To close the **Bootcamp**, the young women pitched in front of the mentors for a chance to secure seed funding from the organization. It was a tough choice but the first chosen recipient was **Sedinam Ameku from Ghana**, working towards equipping women with the much-needed financial literacy skills. You can find her interview [here](#)

The **fellows** were pleased to be part of the program because it helped them polish up their projects and gave them a chance to be in the community with other **women from all over Africa**, learning from them and simply interacting with each other.



# OUR 2021 LEARNINGS



"2021 was a special year for **Girl Talk Afrique Anglophone**. We expanded to three countries, and with each of these countries, we quickly learned different styles and forms of organizing required to minimize risks for marginalized groups and reduce harm/backlash. One of the key lessons we learned was the importance of organizing with specific target groups and creating an intimate and safe environment to share and learn from each other. This major shift also showed us the need to contextualize and apply different forms of organizing depending on the needs and circumstances of each African feminist community" ~ Girl Talk Anglophone.

"As a former participant and GWU fellow and now is the Program Coordinator, I am fortunate to have two lenses in which I view the program. First, from the standpoint of the experience I would like the fellows to have while they join the program and where I would like to see the program going. It is a never-ending learning opportunity( going through the lessons with the mentors and facilitating the sessions). On the other hand, it is an opportunity to keep working on and improving the program with the end goal to have it running smoothly and hopefully increase capacity." ~ Grow with US Fellowship  
Chaneline Mevowanou (Girl Talk Afrique Francophone)

In organizing [Girl Talk in Francophone African countries](#), we have learned three main lessons:

## LINGUISTIC JUSTICE:

Extending [Girl Talk to Francophone African countries](#) has made us realize that linguistic justice should more than ever exist at the heart of our feminist spaces. It takes effort, and we have to try. Many resources for feminists exist in English and not in French, and we need to start finding solutions. [ChooseYourself](#) has started by translating its entire website into [English and French](#), and we need to continue.

There is a need to continue making visible and connecting the francophone feminist movements to others. [Feminist mobilizations exist in Francophone African countries](#), but they are not always visible. Connectivity and access to the internet mean that Francophone feminists are treated as non-existent. [Girl Talk](#) has started to make these young women visible, and we must continue.

Do not institutionalize feminist movements: when the Girl Talk program arrived in Francophone African countries, we received requests from several young women in the north of Benin, different regions of the Ivory Coast, and requests from countries in the area. We saw how young feminists saw hope in this program. When we looked at the reasons for this expectation to host Girl Talk, knowing that several other programs for African feminists exist on the continent, we realized one thing: the institutionalization of feminist movements slows down the creation of change by feminists. And they want free and radical movements. The lesson for us is: we have to be careful about institutionalizing feminist movements. Few programs for feminists exist as Girl Talk exists today with all its vision. We don't put labels on feminists like our affiliations, we don't lead their movements, and we don't impose any way to lead change. Our tools that are spaces and conversations are tools of co-creation. We must continue to do this. "~ Girl Talk Francophone

" 2021 has been a successful journey for the Home Away from Home program. We took up many new bold initiatives during a pandemic and achieved them. However, our biggest lesson was realizing that much work is still required to help refugees thoroughly enjoy their rights as human beings. We need to do more to curb the many injustices women refugees face. It will require a lot of capacity building for women and girls at the refugee camp, financial support, and collaboration with different stakeholders in our niche. Our dream is to one day live in a world where there are no longer refugee camps left because, in truth, no one deserves to live in such circumstances. We intend to make this a reality through our initiatives, as mentioned above, for refugee women. We are transforming lives one refugee camp at a time. ~ Home Away from Home

Being a small organization has helped on how we quickly adjust to changes that serving our communities require. This showed up extensively in 2021 as we managed the pandemic and this work. 2021 taught us to continue listening to our communities, to co-create with them. And also, 2021 showed us our strengths in large: We have programs that move through regions. It's revolutionary to connect young women's organizing across country borders . We are excited about 2022

# THANKS

We would like to especially thank our various donors who work and support us to build a world where gender equity reigns.

We would also like to thank the entire CHOOSE YOURSELF team whose hard work and selflessness has allowed us to be where we are today.

We also thank all the community leaders as well as all the girls and women who gave their time and participated in the realization of the various programs.

*Thank you for your continued support of our efforts to help champion and elevate the voices of all girls and women.*



**CHOOSEYOURSELF**