



*Aspiring*  
LEADERS  
*Inspiring*  
CHANGE



WorldYWCA

# About the World YWCA

We are a global women's rights organisation engaging millions of women, young women and girls around the world each year, across cultures and beliefs, to transform lives and the world for the better. With a presence in over a hundred countries, our work is grassroots-driven, grounded in local communities and rooted in the transformational power of women. We provide support and opportunities for women, young women and girls to become leaders and change-makers who not only protect their rights and impact their communities but inspire their peers to do the same.

We are focused on building a strong, intergenerational network of women and young women leaders, with programmes led by and for women and young women in response to the unique needs they see in their communities.

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# Introduction

**This is a compilation of stories of 15 Young Women Leaders from Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe who are driving change in their communities through initiatives around sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and mental health.**

SRHR and mental health are intertwined, and both must be acknowledged and addressed in a woman's life from an early age. In various communities, the stigma and taboo around women's sexuality and sexual health means that accessing sexual health services, as well as living with conditions related to sexual health, can be traumatic for many. The severity of sexual and reproductive health issues, as well as gender-based violence, have a significant impact on an individual's overall mental health. These directly affect their autonomy to make informed choices. It is therefore imperative to use a more integrated approach towards SRHR and mental health to ensure the well-being of girls, young women and women.

The stories spotlight how these women have become influencers within their communities by fostering a cadre of young women champions to carry forward the mantle. You will read about their engagements and experiences with girls, young women and women; the challenges that they overcome; the successes that they have found; and the individual journeys that they have made as leaders.

Each story in this series is supported by visuals of flowers that form a strong linkage to the country where it's considered a national symbol. Flowers are also the reproductive organs of any plant, thus symbolically representing sexual and reproductive health and highlighting the feminine undertones of the stories. For many people, flowers are a source of joy, hence calling attention to mental well-being.

As we read these stories, let us celebrate the learning process of these 15 young women and the YWCA movement that is investing in leaders who aspire to inspire every day. World YWCA believes that when we invest in young women, we make change that is long lasting and sustainable, better for all.

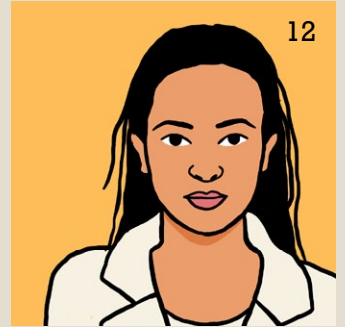
**AFRICA**



Faith, Zambia

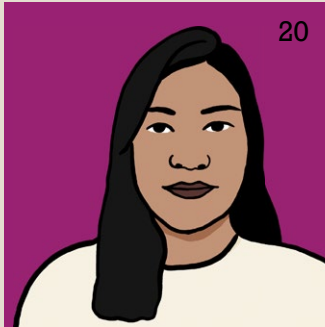


Isabelle, Cameroon

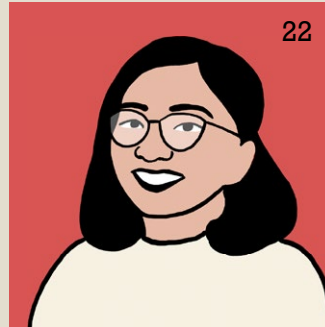


Lidya, Ethiopia

**ASIA**



Kosalina, Sri Lanka

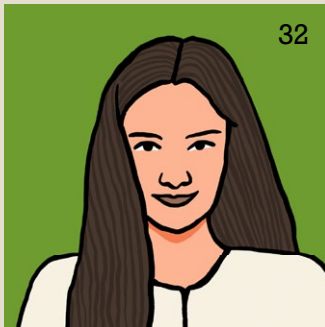


Marla, Philippines



Namrata, India

**EASTERN  
EUROPE**



Alyona, Ukraine

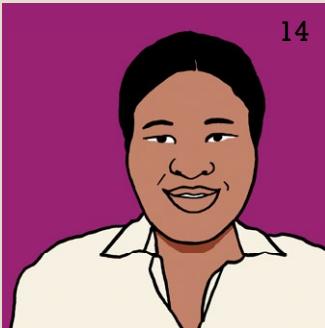


Gohar, Armenia

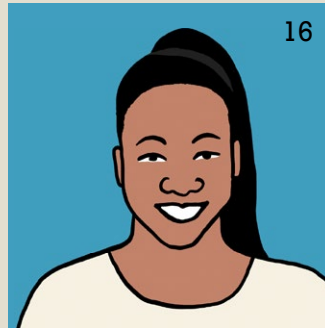


Renata, Belarus





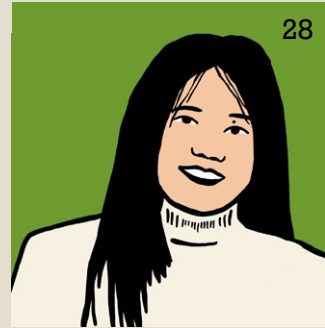
Maureen, Kenya



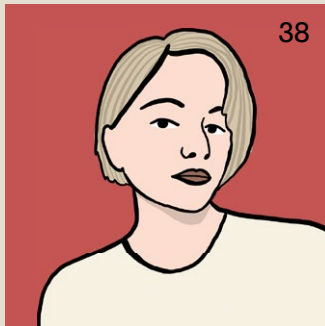
Mayowa, Nigeria



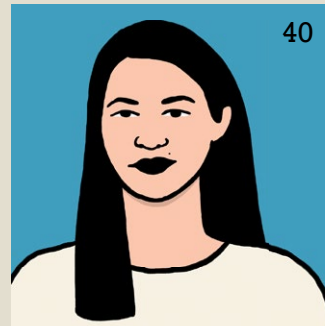
Nanako, Japan



Roni, Nepal



Sasha, Belarus



Tana, Albania

*The*  
**STORIES**





**Bougainvillea** (Zambia), **Red Stinkwood** (Cameroon), **Orchid** (Kenya),  
**Yellow Trumpet** (Nigeria), **Calla Lilly** (Ethiopia)



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If I could go back in time, I would tell my 15-year-old self that the world needs a woman like me.



# Faith Sakala, 27 | Lusaka, Zambia

**Faith** was 19 when her cousin was sexually abused and needed support. The YWCA was the only organisation at the time offering counselling to survivors of gender-based violence. Faith would accompany her cousin to daily sessions, which were never easy to attend. But she could see the difference they were making. Three weeks later, Faith became a volunteer.

Most women didn't know they had been victims of abuse. "That's his way of showing love," some believed in denial and others because they didn't know better. Gender-based violence, sexist cultural practices and constant oppression of women's voices have been long-standing issues in Zambia. Poverty makes it harder for women to leave their abusive partners.

As a YWCA volunteer, Faith mobilised resources to create safe spaces for individual conversations, group discussions, awareness workshops and life skills trainings. This led to the creation of a local community of strong and supportive women, which continues to evolve and expand.

Because of her influence, the girls were able to come together and learn to access legal and shelter facilities to find hope, justice and rehabilitation. Most importantly, they were able to believe in the right to walk out of an unhappy household for the well-being of their children and themselves.

Faith recognised the power of female voices in changing the narrative as she became more involved with young women, and more aware of how community gatekeepers were holding them back. So she started to gain trust and respect of community influencers and religious leaders.

***“ If men and community leaders don't agree with your narrative, you've not done your job.***

In 2020, the pandemic led to an increase in violence against women, affecting their physical and mental health. Faith was quick to adapt to social media to create allies throughout the country. She went over and beyond to leverage radio and local TV channels to reach out to women in distress and provide them support.

The growing number of youth activists have kick-started positive change in Zambia. Women are more vocal about their rights and less fearful of adverse outcomes. Many of their partners now acknowledge women's rights. The national police, too, looks to the YWCA to rehabilitate survivors of abuse. However, this is just the beginning. A lot more needs to be done to sustain a progressive women's movement. Zambia needs inclusive policies and more safe spaces.

“

The story of Oprah Winfrey inspires me. She was sexually abused as a young girl but, that didn't stop her from being the powerful woman she is today.





# Isabelle Voundi, 25 | Maroua, Cameroon

**Isabelle** grew up in a part of Cameroon where people did not discriminate between boys and girls. But at the age of 16, her family relocated to northern Cameroon, where she experienced a cultural shock. Here, girls weren't allowed to talk to boys, they were forced to skip school during menstruation, and were married off at the age of 13.

To stand up against inequality in the town, Isabelle started holding safe spaces for young women and their guardians. She would discuss gender-based violence, child marriages and stereotypes around menstruation with them, and address their views and perspectives in a culturally sensitive manner.

Very soon, community members began to recognise Isabelle as a women's right activist in the region. Young mothers would reach out to her to understand more about sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and say, "I wish our daughter grows up to be like you." A year later, a few people encouraged her to join the YWCA movement, and she did.

As a Young Woman Leader, Isabelle facilitates conversations and trainings in safe spaces for young women and girls. She mobilises 10-14 year olds to understand reproductive health and organs, the first period and menstruation superstitions. With the 15-25 year olds, she comes up with

solutions to address their challenges around family planning, mental health, livelihood opportunities and leadership skills.

In Cameroon, girls are often forced to drop out of school and marry young, resulting in early pregnancy. Lack of education and, thus, an individual source of income makes them dependent on their husbands. All of these have a significant impact on their physical and mental health.

**“It's not easy to change the mentality, especially of parents,** Isabelle laments, emphasising on the need for intergenerational conversations.

A progressive movement is underway though. She can see the influence of her work in creating a powerful community of young women who are enrolling in schools to build their skills, starting small local businesses or taking up new job opportunities.

Today, local teachers want their students to listen to Isabelle. Thirteen year olds aspire to become a leader like her. Young mothers acknowledge her tireless efforts towards women empowerment, and the local mayor believes, "She is a young woman who's blooming. And once she's bloomed, she'd be known all over the world."

“

If I could go  
back in time,  
I would tell my  
15-year-old self  
that you are doing  
great for your age.



# Lidya Almaw Alamrew, 29 | Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

**Lidya** had completed her education and was working as a physician at a public health centre before she joined the YWCA in Ethiopia. She always wanted to give back to her community in a meaningful way and with the YWCA, Lidya was able to facilitate valuable opportunities for young women and support them to access human rights and gender justice.

Lidya wears two hats at YWCA Ethiopia. She focuses on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) as a Young Woman Lead and amplifies the organisation's messaging as a PR, Communications and Membership Development Coordinator. In these roles, she leverages her skills and opportunities, online and offline, to talk to young women about their rights and the services they can access.

In Ethiopia, girls are surrounded by stereotypes that exclude them from a thriving socio-economic life. Families expect women to stay at home and do chores; and if a girl goes to college or to work, they make it seem like a favour. Once married, the husbands get to decide how many kids and what family planning method will be used.

Lidya provides girls and young women with safe spaces to gather for discussions, trainings and workshops on their body and their rights. They learn about family planning, understand the impact of SRHR on mental health and access counselling services. To allow multi-stakeholder exchanges, she reaches out to boys and men in schools and communities to raise awareness about women's rights.

**Through her advocacy and influence, Lidya has been able to create a pool of young leaders in the country who are no longer scared to stand up for themselves.** She is particularly proud of a group of university women who made their voices heard for the effective implementation of the Anti-Harassment Policy on their campuses.

Covid-19 has been particularly difficult for women, amplifying pre-existing challenges and creating new difficulties. Many of them were breadwinners who lost their jobs. Several others were unable to access even basic health care facilities, including pre-natal and post-natal care. These realities frazzled a lot of young women and women physically, emotionally and mentally.

With usual communication channels affected, Lidya had to think outside the box and develop a holistic solution to assist young women. With her YWCA team, she co-created the app called 'Telela' — a multilingual virtual safe space to anonymously engage in peer-to-peer conversations. The app also comes loaded with emergency hotlines, SRHR and mental health resources, and chat rooms with healthcare professionals.

Lidya is motivated by the change she can see; the powerhouses that women have become. She wants to continue working towards building relatable and adaptable solutions for women. With her ongoing efforts and ideas to scale up the mobile app, she plans to reach out to vulnerable and marginalised women in the last mile areas of Ethiopia.




“

To the young women of my country, I'd like to say you are in this world to make a change.



# Maureen Atieno Magak, 30 | Mombasa, Kenya



Ten-year-old **Maureen** was working as a nanny miles away from her village for less than USD 7 a month. By 12 years of age, she had lost her father, her step-father and even her mother. On several occasions, she was sexually harassed and beaten till blue. On some days, she fed herself from trash cans on the streets. But she endured it all; all she asked was to be allowed to attend school.

Maureen's story is deeply moving, but what stands out is her relentless fight for her rights. The fact that Maureen is a Young Woman Lead with the YWCA Movement today, is a testament to what a woman can achieve despite the hardest of conditions. And that's why she's an inspiration to hundreds of young, vulnerable and marginalised women in Kenya.

This young woman has learnt from her own experiences the importance of providing girls and young women with knowledge about their body, their rights and their mental well-being. She facilitates peer learning sessions to educate women about self-awareness, self-esteem and empathy. She provides them with resources to gain sex education, and with trainings to become small business owners.

Aware of the realities of girls who've been exposed to harm at a young age, Maureen encourages them to take ownership of their lives. Committed to ending the cycle of gender-based violence (GBV) in Kenya, Maureen has created support groups that promise women extreme confidentiality and foster a culture of shared experiences as therapy.

Maureen understands that talking about trauma is not easy, nor is holding on to it. So she uses unique approaches to foster sisterhood among girls and young women. One of her popular engagement activities is the 'Artistic Fridays' where young women and men indulge in arts to express themselves. They sing, dance, recite poems and act out what they're feeling and advocate for mental health.

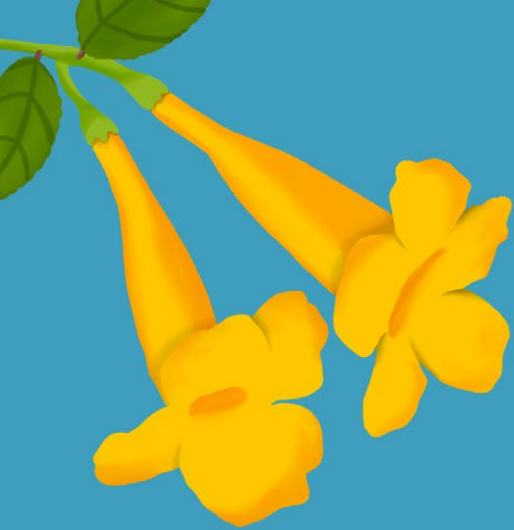
During the pandemic, when GBV spiked in a country already notorious for it, Maureen collectivised local civil society organisations to come to the rescue of women in need. They put in place toll-free helplines, chat-based counselling, tele-conferencing, video sessions and even an app with resources on GBV, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and mental health.

Maureen passionately advocates for women's welfare, and champions her mentees to become advocates in their own communities. She believes that she found her voice at the YWCA, and so wants to leverage that door of opportunity to help others find theirs.

**“ I stand for empowering women.  
I stand for empowering boys.  
I don't leave them out,** she says.

And she doesn't. Her sessions are open to all communities and genders. She engages with people of different faiths, beliefs and backgrounds to help them overcome challenges related to their physical and mental health.





“

To the young women  
of my country,  
I'd like to say  
be aware,  
be determined,  
be courageous and  
be goal-getters.





# Mayowa O. Oni-orisan, 30 | Lagos, Nigeria

**Mayowa** and her two sisters were raised by a single mother who was a dedicated homemaker and school teacher. She was one of the few women of her community who dared to dream big and follow through. Mayowa, too, became an advocate for equal opportunities and women's rights at a young age.

Today, the YWCA gives Mayowa a bigger platform to continue her work. She organises meetings, seminars, trainings and workshops for young women and women where she discusses menstrual health and hygiene, reproductive rights and mental health. She often convenes inter-sectoral discussions between scholars, politicians, pastors and Muslim clerics with young women and girls, and then relays community input to policy makers.

In Nigeria, people think sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is for the elites. Children from marginalised families are exposed to parents having intercourse in the same room, and lack of sex education in schools leaves them with misconceptions about SRHR.

**“When I look at my 4-year-old daughter, I want to ensure she is safe and respected. I want the same for the other girls.”**

Mayowa's work often meets with resistance. “Oh she's trying to corrupt young girls and turn them against their family beliefs,” they say. But that never deters her. She believes she has the power to change their lives for a better tomorrow. “The change is slow, but it's happening.”

Mayowa has encouraged young women to believe in themselves, attend colleges and advocate for their body and rights in their respective communities. She can now even see a collective of supportive men who understand that women need to be treated with dignity, that they must not be abused, and that their SRHR must be respected.

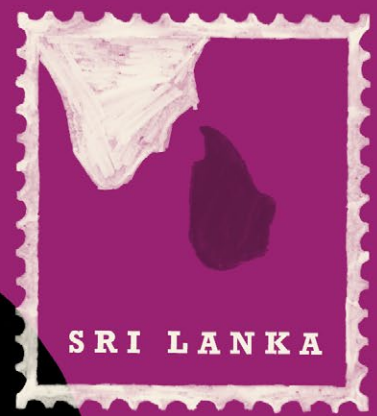
Before the pandemic, she would visit community centres and market places to build trust among women and men. The lockdown, however, replaced town hall meetings with WhatsApp group chats. Besides hosting rights-based discourses online, she was checking-in on the physical and mental well-being of women, and ensuring supply of sanitation and hygiene products for those who couldn't access any.

Mayowa believes that change starts at home, so she talks to her daughter about good touch and bad touch. “There is no age too early or too late to talk about SRHR.” She acknowledges that older generations are less aware of their rights due to the lack of opportunity and platforms to learn about it when they were young.





**Rhododendron** (Nepal), **Cherry Blossom** (Japan), **Sampaguita** (Philippines),  
**Lotus** (India), **Blue Water Lily** (Sri Lanka)



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**My mother, Vasanthi, is the most inspiring woman I know. When I was a child, she protected me. When I was a teen, she guided me through life. And now when I'm a young adult, she trusts me with my life decisions. She was my first safe space, where I flourished into who I am today.**



# Kosalina Vignarajah, 25 | Colombo, Sri Lanka

**Kosalina** was born to Sri Lankan parents in Lebanon where Eastern and Western cultures co-existed. She was living under a more western influence though. When she was 9, her family relocated to Sri Lanka where communities were more conservative. She was attending an international school, living in a traditional community and growing up towards the end of a Civil War.

When Kosalina moved to Colombo for higher education, she found a relatable open minded atmosphere in this city, which was more cosmopolitan. After graduation, she found a place to stay at the YWCA Hostel for Working Women, and soon saw herself registering to volunteer for women's empowerment and advocacy initiatives.

Kosalina involved herself with the community to understand the needs of girls and young women, and quickly grasped their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) issues and its impact on their mental health. She prioritised their concerns and mobilised the resources required to conduct trainings and sessions for them. She was motivated to build the capacities of young girls in order to foster a cadre of future leaders.

In Sri Lanka, communities are rooted in their own traditions and customs. In some regions, a girl has to be isolated for a month when she gets her first period. In another, girls and women have to carry iron on them while they're menstruating. In most other communities, girls are not allowed to enter the temple during this period.

**Kosalina created safe spaces for youth groups to discuss menstruation, sexually-transmitted diseases, contraceptives, and the right to their body.** She would tread carefully around cultural sensitivities to call out harmful practices. Furthermore, since a lot of young adults were gathering sex education from the internet, even pornography, she started sharing valuable resources to tackle misleading and sexist information.

When the pandemic hit, Kosalina made quick adjustments to her strategy and set up social media accounts to keep communication channels open between her mentees. She designed infographics to amplify awareness about Covid-19. To counter the increasing cases of child and women abuse, she participated in World YWCA campaign 'Week Without Violence', and partnered with youth to spread the word.

With the support from Kosalina's offline and online awareness sessions and trainings on SRHR and mental health, a lot of young women have been able to collectivise power to bring up their challenges and rights. Meanwhile, a common social media platform called 'Voices of Asian Activists' enables them to tap into the power and influence of their peers in the region.

Kosalina recognises that many women, including her, have had to break their walls to be able to openly talk about rights with their families and communities. And with more safe spaces, trainings and leadership skills, young Sri Lankan women will soon be empowered to make their own decisions and lead fulfilling lives.

“

If I could go back in time, I would tell my 15-year-old self that the fear of the unknown will not always be scary.







# Marla May Baes, 26 | Manila, Philippines

A fin-tech business developer at mind and a women's rights volunteer at heart, **Marla** joined the YWCA when she was 16 but it wasn't until she was 23 that she became a proactive volunteer. At that time, she was looking for a direction in life, and had the opportunity to engage with youth to gain insights into their challenges.

In the Philippines, people don't openly talk about their mental health needs. If someone admits to suffering from depression or anxiety, relatives and friends recommend that they "pray it off". And conversations about women's issues and concerns around sexual and reproductive rights are almost completely avoided, so much so that some young girls believe kissing can cause pregnancy.

As a Young Woman Lead and the National Youth Coordinating President, Marla has a lot of responsibility towards implementing change for the future of youth. She's constantly thinking of new ways to engage young women, and regularly planning for seminars — and now webinars — around skill building for unemployed millennials and marketing of local goods for budding entrepreneurs.

She uses simple messages in local dialects, with cultural context, to communicate to young people, especially mothers, about their bodies and rights and debunks menstrual myths. Through dialogues around leadership, she encourages women to

stand up for themselves and educates them on their right to decide who they marry.

Covid-19 brought a whole set of new problems. Other than the disease, the Philippines saw a surge in child marriages and teenage pregnancies. There were frequent stories about teenagers taking their lives due to the increased stress of the pandemic and its consequences. To respond to these escalating issues, she planned a series of steps.

She proactively reached out to her network of young women and women to explain the measures needed to fight Covid-19. She hosted regular sessions to equip them with a positive frame of mind to improve their mental well-being in the lockdown. One particular session on 'How to Cope with Covid-19' reached 14,000 individuals.

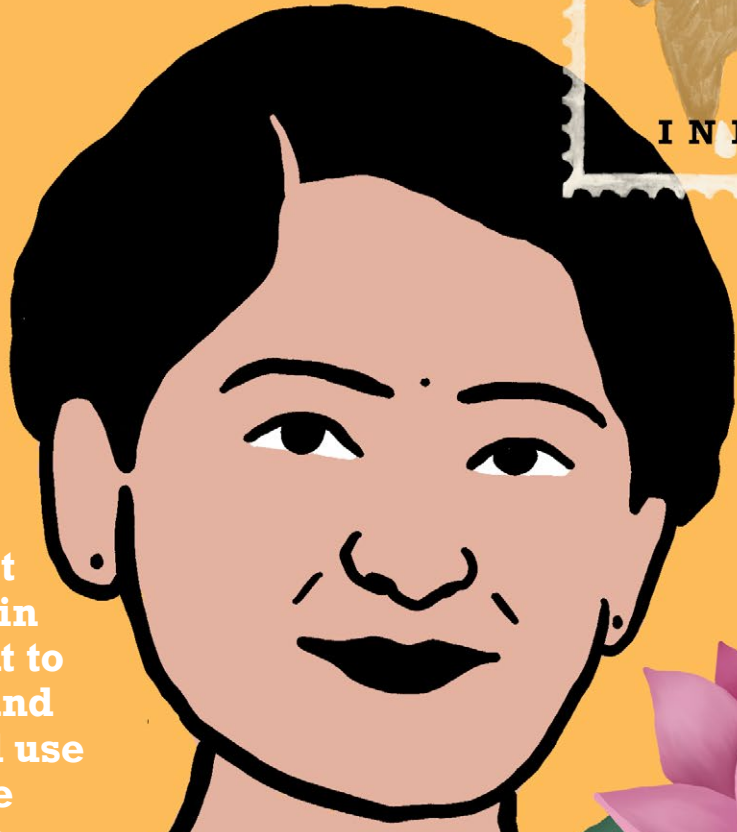
A lot of Filipinas have started showing interest in volunteering, and Marla sees that as a great opportunity to initiate change.

**“I feel that young women's ideas and insights are untapped**, she says; and believes that if more young women's voices are heard, the country will not just have more inclusive policies but also a healthier environment for mental health.



“

To the young women of my country, I'd like to say that I know it is hard to be a female or a third gender in our country. But don't let that stop you from believing in yourself. Instead, allow it to encourage you to unite and respect one another, and use your voice to amplify the good and spread the love.



# Namrata Sharma, 29 | New Delhi, India

As a young girl, **Namrata** was raised the same way as her three brothers. The boys in her house didn't get any preferential treatment. However, as her body began to change after puberty, family and relatives' perceptions around her also started shifting. Her father was hesitant about sending her to college, but she persisted and enrolled herself.

Today, Namrata is a counseling psychologist with YWCA Delhi, and works with vulnerable and oppressed communities. She interacts with young girls and women who have been sexually abused or harassed, who are single mothers, or those who have been abandoned by their families. Namrata empathetically listens to them, guides them to navigate out of their struggles, and champions for their rights.

During the pandemic, when reports of domestic violence and burnouts started increasing, Namrata responded to the needs of young women by taking up online sessions on sexual harassment and mental health. Besides sharing with them necessary resources for schemes, laws and helplines, Namrata provided them with a trust-based relationship where they could openly engage in meaningful conversations.

Through her inclusive approach with marginalised young women, Namrata has become an ally for these women who come to her to understand how to raise their daughters better, how to provide their children with age-appropriate sex education, and how to make their peers more aware of their rights. In South Asia, topics of sex and menstruation are

not openly spoken about, especially around boys and men. "I encourage young mothers to talk about menstruation to their daughters when the fathers are around," Namrata says. This creates an environment where girls feel safe to open up about concerns related to their bodies.

In a country like India where joint families are common and traditional practices are passed down the generations, gender-biases seep in as soon as a child is conceived. Namrata feels that intergenerational conversations can help break the stereotypes around women's role and well-being. This is also beneficial when addressing mental health in families where therapy is associated with shame.

**Over the last three years, Namrata has been an advocate for mental health, especially for girls, young women and women.** She believes information empowers communities, and she mobilises not just young women, but also community gatekeepers, police personnel and government officials to become more sensitive to women's needs and more responsive to their mental well-being.

For Namrata, joining the YWCA has been like the fuel to her career. She feels lucky and determined to be in a position where she can help women free themselves from societal, familial and mental barriers. "My work has been put to a great cause," she believes, adding that India needs more young women leads who can advocate for their rights.



“

**If I could go back in time, I would tell my 15-year-old self that you're not the only one suffering with your mental health. Talk to your teachers, family and friends.**



# Nanako Tojo, 25 | Kyoto, Japan



**Nanako** had completed her graduation and was looking for volunteering opportunities on the internet when she came across the YWCA and immediately felt motivated to join. What piqued her interest was that the YWCA provided accommodations to international students, a cohort with whom she had actively engaged with at the university.

Nanako is passionate about her work with the students of Japan. She organises leadership trainings and workshops for school students. She believes it is important to mobilise and support the values of leadership at an early age, so that young girls can demand their rightful place in the society.

Nanako is receptive to the needs of young people and is driven by evidence and realities of the community. She engages school students in conversations about the potential of advocating on digital platforms and the role of mainstream media to influence conscious thinking. She addresses the challenges of workplace frustration among young working women, and the high levels of stress among university students.

Before the pandemic, she would visit educational institutions to communicate with school students directly. She now hosts awareness sessions and training workshops for them online. To build camaraderie between young working women and university students, she often organises group-based recreational activities where they share

their favourite music, books and movies. And Nanako uses the opportunity to analyse them with a gender lens.

**With her community-based leadership approach, Nanako is encouraging an atmosphere of mutual exchange and shared learnings.**

Despite the fact that sexual and reproductive health and rights are largely unspoken about in Japan, Nanako has been able to persuade young women and girls to talk to her about the changes in their body and needs.

While it might seem like the world is progressing, there's still a long way to go for equal rights. At home, young women don't find the safe space to address questions about their body with their families. At work, the culture is mostly sexist. In married households, women are primarily seen as homemakers and caretakers of the children. But these same women are noticing a shift in their own perspectives.

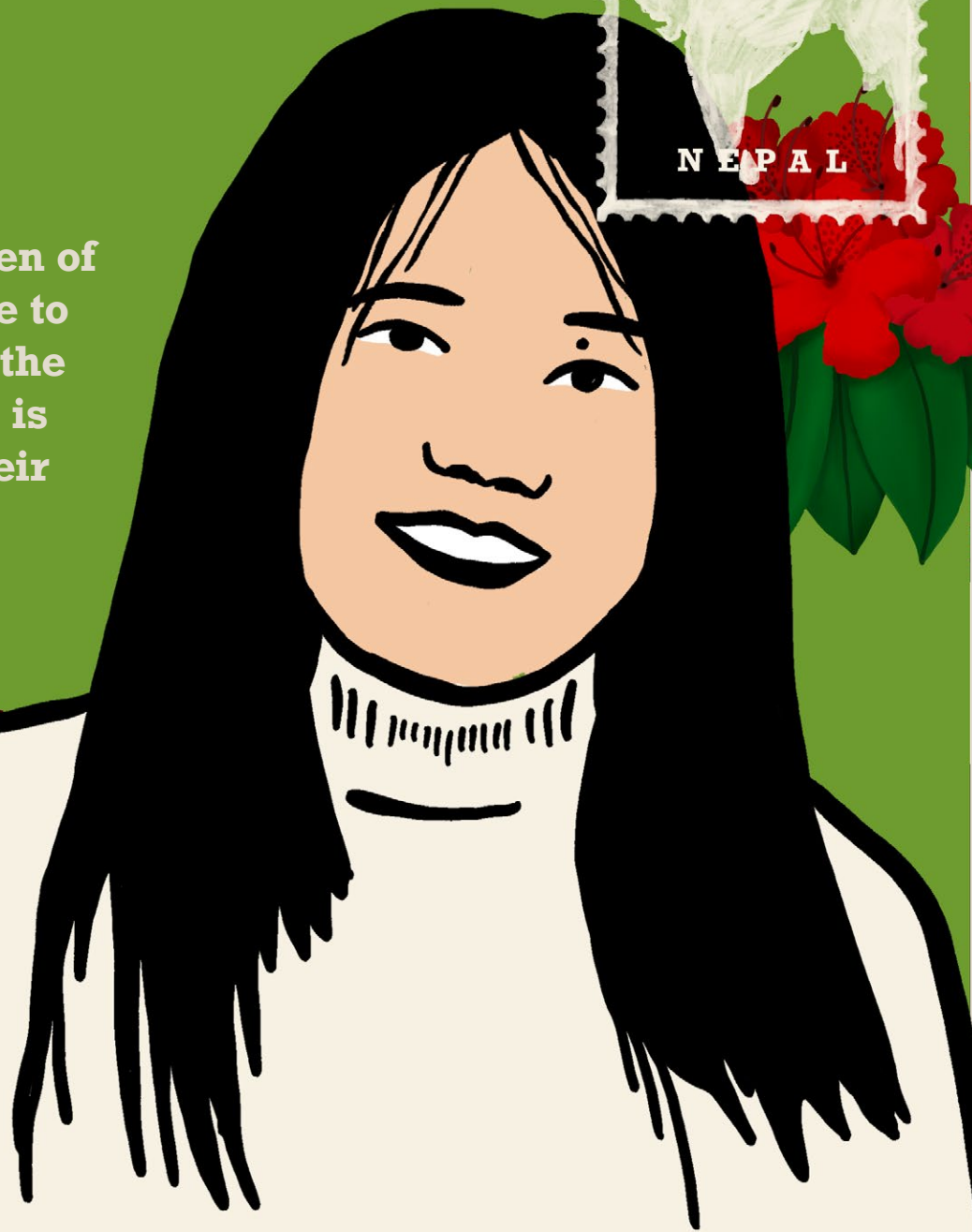
With a focus on building skills, confidence and knowledge exchange, Nanako has been able to encourage a sustained increase in participation of young women and girls. This has led to the creation of a pool of young aspiring women who are willing to think big and pursue their dreams. Nanako's next goal is to lead more women into decision-making roles in Japan.






“

To the young women of my country, I'd like to say that they have the right to know what is happening with their bodies.





# Roni Shakya, 24 | Madhyapur Thimi, Nepal



**Roni** was an inquisitive young girl, and had questions about menstruation and the female body. But when she asked her mother about them, like most Nepali kids, she was shut down and told to wait until she got married. That's when she decided to address the concerns regarding menstruation with girls and young women in her community and educate them about their rights.

When Roni first joined the YWCA, she focused on schools, colleges and universities. As she discussed sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and mental health with students, she also pushed the administrations to ensure there were separate toilets for girls with adequate access to water and disposal facilities. She facilitated knowledge exchange between teachers, parents and community members for long-term sustainable impact.

Over the years, Roni has collaborated with various organisations and women's groups to reach out to diverse groups of young women and create awareness about family planning, contraceptives, safe abortions and menstrual health management in the region.

Roni's work is not easy. She, like many of her fellow Young Women Leads, is subjected to frequent verbal and mental abuse from local men. Many schools refuse to let her conduct SRHR sessions because they consider them to be inappropriate and a means to corrupt children.

Nepal is a conservative country where SRHR is often brushed aside. In some communities, girls and women are isolated in an outhouse when they're menstruating — a practice called '*Chhaupadi*'. During this period, they are considered "impure" and prohibited from interacting with the family. In several cases, girls are known to have been sexually abused or suffocated to death while in exile.

The pandemic made it even more crucial for Roni to continue her work. As screen time increased during this period, Roni took the opportunity to regularly provide youth-friendly digital content about SRHR and mental health on social media and messaging platforms. She also created communication material about cyber bullying to navigate a new problem that boys and girls were facing in Nepal.

**Over the last year, Roni has been hosting awareness and training sessions to talk about menstrual hygiene.**

She addresses mental health issues, and provides counselling to girls, young women and women who need support. She's even been lobbying with the government to ensure sanitary napkins are included in family relief packages.

Roni understands that Nepal needs safe spaces and gender-friendly environments where people can converse without fear of judgement, engage in meaningful participation and take part in decision making for themselves. And she wants more young women to take the lead to push this movement forward.





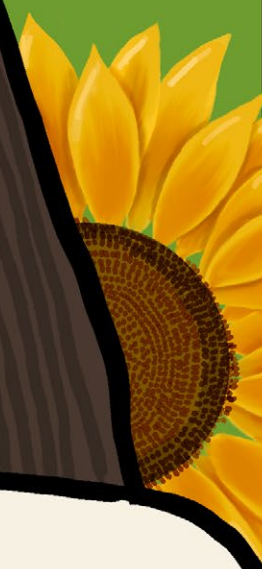
EASTERN  
EUROPE

**Red Poppy** (Albania), **Common Flax** (Belarus),  
**Sunflower** (Ukraine), **Marshmallow Plant** (Armenia)



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If I could go back in time, I would tell my 15-year-old self that believe in yourself, love yourself and respect yourself in every moment of your life.



# Alyona Pryvydentseva, 30 | Kiev, Ukraine

**Alyona** was always leading activities in high school and at the university, and after a chance meeting with the President of YWCA Ukraine, she became an active volunteer. She understood issues in the local community, and came up with actions to respond to the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and mental health needs of the people.

Women in Ukraine have a strong sense of responsibility and capability towards ensuring their safety and stability. They take on various roles — a breadwinner, a mother, a daughter, a wife, a manager and a housekeeper. Women say, “We’re like a man dressed in a skirt.” But playing all these roles simultaneously often impacts their mental health.

With nearly 200,000 Instagram followers, Alyona is an influencer who firmly believes in the power of the internet. She uses an inclusive and collaborative approach to enable young girls to develop skills, confidence and knowledge to drive transformative actions towards women’s mental health.

She organises trainings, facilitates support groups and creates safe spaces to broaden and mainstream the dialogue around mental health. Led by and for young women, these virtual sessions spread the message of acknowledging one’s feelings and loving oneself.

By working with girls and young women in pairs or small groups, she builds a relationship of trust, allowing them to share their unique experiences in an environment where they would not be judged. Women are free to speak their minds and express their feelings, knowing well that they would be heard and supported.

Alyona has also used her digital marketing strengths across social media channels to amplify stories for the **“I Am Not Ideal. I Am Real”** campaign. A campaign that was able to successfully build a network of young women ready to engage in meaningful conversations and make progressive moves towards improved mental health.

Ukrainian women are not used to talking about themselves because of the stigma associated with mental illness. However, with Alyona’s support, her mentees have started to confront their issues in front of their families and peers about their mental health problems, strengthening resilience among them and fostering a respectful environment.

Schools, families and the government still view a woman’s role as a wife and a mother as their primary responsibility, she feels. Instead, for a meaningful and lasting change, they should invest in skilling young women, empowering them, and focusing on their mental well-being.





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To the young women  
of my country, I'd like  
to say that if not now,  
then when? If not us,  
then who?





# Gohar Aslikyan, 30 | Berdavan, Armenia

**Gohar** grew up in a border village between Georgia and Azerbaijan, and could have never imagined she'd grow up to be a change-maker in her community, breaking stereotypes. But she is now on the Board of YWCA Armenia, and has trained over 100 girls in the country in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Raised in a conflict zone, where families have been subjected to frequent violence and trauma, girls and young women's SRHR and mental health are hardly prioritised. Taboos around SRHR and domestic violence are common, so are sex-selective abortions. And amid a global pandemic, young people were particularly ill-equipped to cope with the war.

Driven by the needs of young women in a sensitive environment, Gohar created safe spaces to talk about their bodies and rights. "When I saw these girls attending sessions, I saw myself in their souls. I was afraid they'd grow up to be just like me, with the same problems. I wanted to lead by example and question misconceptions."

Many girls in the community struggled to deal with their mental health, make friends, find jobs and live their lives on their own terms because of stereotypes and conditioning. However, they now confidently champion their rights and lives. This has been the influence of the online and offline conversations Gohar initiated about women's health and livelihood opportunities.

**With a view on sustainable change, she brought in parents and teachers into the conversation, raised questions about taboos, and engaged more caregivers and community gatekeepers in the dialogue about the present and future of women's health and well-being.**

It cannot be denied that the Covid-19 pandemic added to the psychological crisis in Armenia. To deal with growing loneliness, stress and anxiety, Gohar started a YouTube vlog about regional cuisines. It even made it to local news channels. The idea was to influence women across generations and provide them with an objective to find their own hobbies.

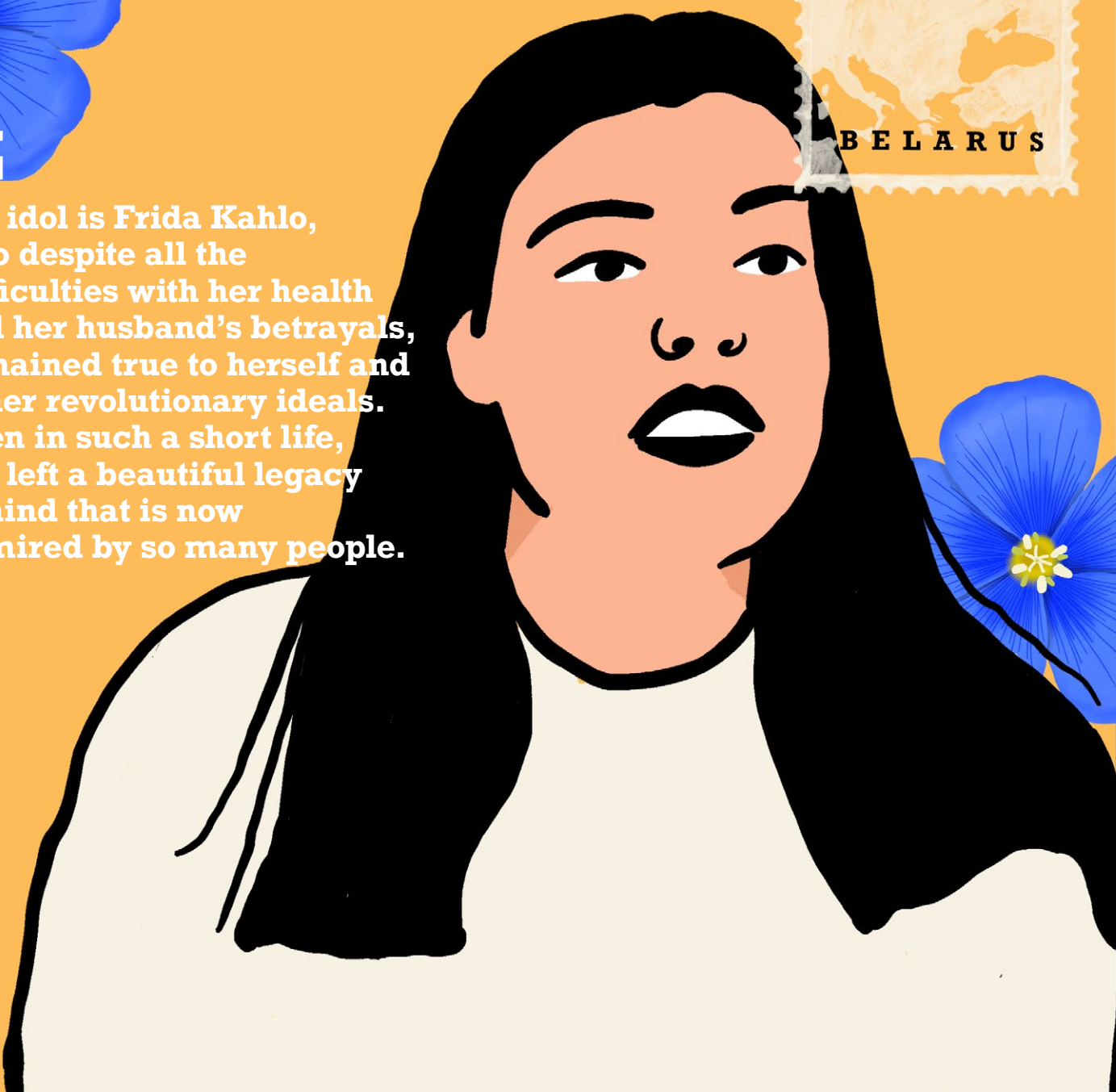
Because of Gohar's perseverance, some girls from her village and neighbouring villages have even started selling handicrafts online. They have learned to be independent and self-reliant. "I'm overjoyed to see girls in my village making decisions for themselves, going to the municipality, and laying out their demands."

Gohar believes that reproductive health rights cannot be addressed in isolation, but require a comprehensive gender-based approach. Inputs and feedback from young boys and girls on issues about them will help tackle their problems and challenges. "We need support and time to rediscover ourselves," she believes.





**My idol is Frida Kahlo, who despite all the difficulties with her health and her husband's betrayals, remained true to herself and to her revolutionary ideals. Even in such a short life, she left a beautiful legacy behind that is now admired by so many people.**



# Renata Glembotskaya, 24 | Vitebsk, Belarus

**Renata** was introduced to YWCA Belarus when she was 18 by a teacher at her university. Her volunteer journey began with topics of gender equality and advocacy, then grew to include menstrual health, gynaecological violence, intimate partner violence and contraceptives, among other sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) issues.

Belarus is a traditional society, with several stereotypes. There is also the problem of misinformation among young women in her region. A lot of women are misled about SRHR, they frequently consume the morning-after pills, they're unaware of their period of ovulation, and consider body hair to be strictly unattractive. These contribute to women's low self-esteem and affect their health.

In her leadership role, Renata organises training marathons for gender equality and has even participated in sex education festivals to help drive change. Considering the popularity of social media in Belarus, she leverages it to connect with young people, teachers, parents, influencers and youth experts, and widen online safe spaces.

With the shift to virtual meetings in the pandemic, Renata carefully navigated the line between privacy and safe spaces. Conversations about SRHR and its effect on mental health required confidentiality, but at the same time she encouraged people to use their real names and turn on their cameras to foster an empathetic and judgment-free atmosphere.

**Renata's experiences with girls, young women and women have been a learning journey for her.** She has to constantly unlearn and learn to engage with teenagers, to better understand the woes of young mothers, and to support women who've been abused.

In this journey, Renata has also faced backlash in more ways than one. She has been accused of "being interested in gender when there are more critical issues to address in Belarus". However, Renata is sure of what she's doing, and she's glad to see women accepting their bodies, recognising their needs, and putting themselves first.

Renata's support during the pandemic has been unwavering. She has frequently set up live streaming interviews with gynaecologists and psychologists to discuss SRHR and reach out to young women and women who were feeling isolated. She also continues to advocate using social media to share accurate information about SRHR, and support them.

Renata says that change needs to be bottom-up. People need to change their views, attitudes, behaviours, and values. And for this they need more awareness, trainings and knowledge to make informed decisions and sustain change. She believes, "The future of Belarus is female; it's only a matter of time."



“

If I could go back in time, I'd tell my 15-year-old self that it's okay to not fit the standards. It's not necessary to compete with other girls, it's better to unite with them and support each other.

# Sasha Sokolova, 26 | Minsk, Belarus

For **Sasha**, the YWCA has been a springboard into a career as a gender rights activist. It was through this platform that, for the first time, she experienced women's unity and a respectful attitude towards women's issues.

Raised in an all-women household, Sasha always found a supportive environment for her ideas and beliefs. Even as a child, she defied gender stereotypes and did what she wanted. And so, it came as no surprise for her family when she chose to be an activist.

Due to the political crisis in Belarus, navigating gender-based issues has been challenging. Men are prone to venting their frustrations on women around them, leading to extreme trauma for the latter, and even violence. Yet, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and mental health are largely ignored by the people, who are unable to prioritise these issues in this situation.

In the current climate, activists, too, have been finding it difficult to concentrate on SRHR issues and its interlinkages with mental health. Sasha, however, has been leading online interactions with bloggers, reformers and sex educators to expand the movement. They, in turn, actively use social media to spread knowledge about the subject.

**To address SRHR, Sasha organised several activities, including a workshop for more than a dozen Belarusian journalists on how to report on sexual abuse, SRHR and women's rights.**

The purpose of the training was to enhance mainstream media's capacity to provide well-informed, non-sexist and factual information to the public while countering misleading and sexist narrative.

To spread the message of SRHR widely, Sasha teamed up with Fem FM, a podcast about women's issues and rights. The podcast has been able to build its own community of users who engage in "feminist chats" on Telegram and use a custom collection of chat stickers to create awareness about SRHR. She calls it a **"Fem Collaboration"**.

While activists and media from all sides are now uniting to make their voices heard about SRHR and mental health, and more and more young people are taking the lead, there is still a long way to go. But Sasha continues to stay committed to work with women in her community, taking one step at a time.



“

**To the women of  
my country, I'd like  
to say that believe  
in yourself and in  
your big dreams!**





# Tana Aliaj, 26 | Tirana, Albania

A clinical psychologist and professor, **Tana** grew up in a family which has been a model for equality, and where values of tolerance and empathy were always held high. However, the ongoing battle for gender rights and women's struggles, taboos and rigid norms outside her household motivated her to join the YWCA.

In Albania, the patriarchal culture is clearly outlined by high cases of domestic violence, lack of girls and women in decision making roles, and constant objectification of women. On the health front, cases of breast cancer have been rising in recent years, and a neglect towards sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for generations has left many young girls and women struggling to understand their body and rights.

Tana's work with the YWCA focuses on awareness and capacity building around social inclusion, equal opportunities, women empowerment; which she addresses through on-ground community interactions, trainings and educational programmes. She also facilitates access to SRHR services, education and personal growth programmes for young women and women.

Her engagements with her students have been especially rewarding. These girls are aware of their rights and, thus, less vulnerable to gender-based discrimination and violence. Young women, too,

are more receptive to seeking psychological support. Tana also provides guidance to families of breast cancer patients, to raise awareness about the disease and support caregivers.

During the pandemic, many girls and women feared loss of education, unemployment, reduced salaries and lack of access to essential services. Several women found themselves trapped in the houses, with no escape from their abusive fathers, brothers or husbands. This exacerbated their mental health struggles.

Tana says it is imperative to continue raising awareness about SRHR and mental health, and facilitating access to quality services for girls, young women and women.

**“ These issues can't be treated as taboos, but need to be promoted as fundamental rights that enhance the quality of life for girls and women. ”**

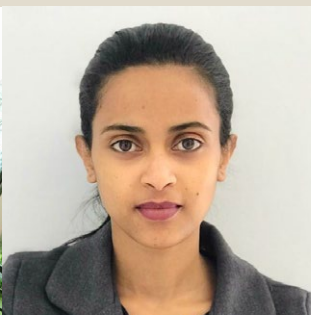
Over the last few years, Tana has received a lot of positive reviews from young women and women, and has heard a lot of success stories that inspire her to keep going. She understands that Albania needs sustained and holistic efforts to develop culturally-sensitive programmes for the young population, and is committed to it.



Faith



Isabelle



Lidya



Maureen



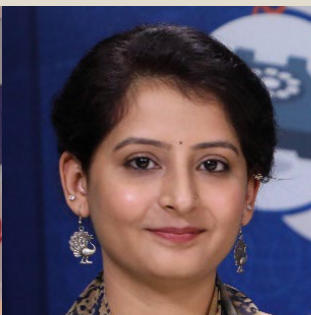
Mayowa



Kosalina



Marla



Namrata



Nanako



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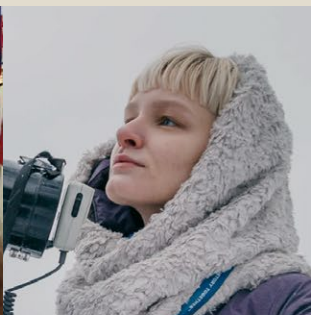
Alyona



Gohar



Renata



Sasha



Tana



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