



Interview of the Month
Melissa Hillebrenner
Director, Girl Up, UN Foundation Initiative
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1. **GenderHopes:** You are the Director of Girl Up, a United Nations Foundation initiative to engage girls to take action. Can you tell us more about how Girl Up works, and its main objectives?

Melissa Hillebrenner: Girl Up engages girls to stand up for adolescent girls, empowering each other and changing our world. Our youth leaders, representing more than 1,100 Girl Up Clubs in 66 countries, stand up, speak up, and rise up to support the hardest to reach girls living in places where it is hardest to be a girl.

Since its launch in 2010, the campaign has funded United Nations programs that promote the health, safety, education, and leadership of girls in developing countries. Our unique leadership training and skill development has created a generation of current and future girl leaders; leaders who have helped Girl Up raise millions of dollars for UN programs, lobbied members of Congress to stop child marriage and ensure that girls are registered at birth, and have showed their schools, friends and communities the true power of girls.

2. **How does Girl Up ensure that it reaches the girls that at most vulnerable and hardest to reach, but who are the ones who need it the most?**

Through Girl Up's partnership with the United Nations in five focus countries, we know that our work is reaching the girls who most need to be reached, and providing them with what they need the most. The United Nations is an international organization with the reach and vision capable of solving global problems. By partnering with the UN, we are able to decide on the exact programs we support, visit those programs regularly and receive regular updates about the programs' outcomes.

3. **Since the UN declared 11 October the International Day of the Girl Child, what progress have you seen for girls in the world? How do you see the impact of this Day?**

This year we celebrated the fourth International Day of the Girl Child, and

each year the day gets bigger and the issue of adolescent girls gets more attention. I would say this is the most important marker of progress we have seen; improving the lives of adolescent girls around the world is now an important issue in the development space, in the media, and with the general public. For example, when the Millennium Development Goals were gavelled in 15 years ago, they didn't even mention adolescent girls. Now, as the global goals for sustainable development were just gavelled in, girls not only have their own goal (Goal 5- gender equality), but they are also woven into a number of the goals.

International Day of the Girl has played an important role in this progress. This day is really a moment to highlight the importance and the value of adolescent girls. I think every movement needs a rallying point, and this day is ours.

4. The Girls Count Act ensures that children in developing countries are registered at birth. How will such a measure directly benefit girls?

Being registered at birth is a key milestone in a girl's life that helps set her on a path of success. If she is not registered it can cause a lifetime of hardship in getting basic services and rights, such as access to education, the right to vote, and getting a job. Additionally, if a girl is not registered, it makes it harder to keep her safe from horrors such as trafficking.

The Girls Count Act, signed into law by President Obama earlier this year, was a huge priority for Girl Up. This legislation gives United States Executive Branch agencies the authority to provide assistance to support registering and counting of girls in developing countries.

5. Early marriage, early pregnancy, childbirth, sexual violence, HIV and lack of access to education. Girls are faced with multiple challenges throughout their lives. Which issue do you see as the most critical to tackle to improve the lives of girls today and in the future?

It is important to take a comprehensive approach toward empowering girls, which means tackling all of the issues you list. If I had to choose, however, I would choose education. The evidence is compelling: every year of schooling increases a girl's future earnings by 10-20%. When a girl in a developing country receives seven or more years of education, she marries four years later and has two fewer children on average. She is more likely to get health care for herself and her children. Investing in a girl's education has a ripple effect that can improve the lives of not only her, but her family, her community, and her country. By working to get every girl in school, we also have to address her specific barriers to that goal. Depending on where she lives the other issues you mention have to be addressed. We can't reach our goal of educating girls if they are married, pregnant or at risk of violence – we have to address them all equally.

6. Do you think that there is a need to also work with communities to change the social acceptance of many of these issues, such as early marriage?

Absolutely. If we are going to make any long-term systemic progress for girls it will require all of us to come together and make girls a priority. Through our work supporting UN programs, we have seen time and time again that community participation and buy-in is key.

In Liberia, Girl Up supports UN programs that focus on mobilizing parents, teachers, and PTAs to enrol girls in school. In Guatemala we support a UN program that brings together government institutions and community leaders to teach girls how to respond when gender-based violence occurs.

7. What actions can our readers take to support and improve the conditions for young girls worldwide?

Every person has the potential to make a difference in the life of a girl. Anyone can advocate, fundraise, or be a leader to empower adolescent girls worldwide. Make sure your voice is heard on the issues that are important to girls. Reach out to your elected officials and tell them why adolescent girls matter. Speak out at a town hall. Send a letter to your local newspaper. Just make sure you are heard.

You can also raise funds for United Nations programs that support girls living in places where it is hardest to be a girl through Girl Up. If you're interested in learning more, visit GirlUp.org.

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Melissa Hillebrenner is the Director of Girl Up— an innovative campaign of the United Nations Foundation that works to build a youth constituency dedicated to improving the lives of the world's hardest-to-reach girls. The campaign mobilizes teen girls to raise funds and awareness for United Nations programs that serve adolescent girls in developing countries.

Melissa served as Deputy Director of the campaign prior to becoming Director. Before joining the UN Foundation, Melissa was a National Director for OP3, Inc., where she helped to manage the nine-city multi-day Avon Walk for Breast Cancer series, which raises \$45 million each annual season. She oversaw national staff and remote field teams, and introduced a program called the Youth Crew, which targets youth ages 10-16 to participate in the walk and raise money for the Avon Foundation.

Melissa holds a Bachelor of Journalism in Strategic Communication from the University of Missouri. She recently completed the Course on Exponential Fundraising through Harvard University. Previous experience includes donor relations and marketing for Hinsdale Hospital and the American Red Cross of Chicago. She is an active volunteer and coach with Girls on the Run of Washington DC.