

# PROFILE

## Moment of reckoning



Oxfam Girls Education Programme scholarship recipients. Photo: Insiya Syed/Oxfam

The international aid sector is having a moment of reckoning. Development and humanitarian organizations are pressed to look inward and ask themselves how the legacy of colonialism manifests in their work. Embracing anti-racism requires de-colonizing aid to ensure that those experiencing poverty, discrimination and injustice have the resources and the power to drive change for good.

Supporting local organizations to lead emergency responses when disaster strikes, providing core funding to grassroots women rights organizations and ensuring community-led development. These are all the right and smart things to do. So, why is this so hard?

Because aid organizations based in the 'Global North' hold resources and power that they must relinquish to make space for those who have historically been excluded. Giving up power and letting others sit in the driver's seat is never easy. Our drive to decolonize aid is rooted in our vision of a just, sustainable future. We want a future that isn't dictated by power and privilege but rather lifted up by the joy of equality. We know that shifting power and resources closer to the grassroots makes profound and

lasting change - just look at the past few years in the Philippines.

In the Philippines, 15 per cent of girls are married before their 18th birthday, and two per cent are married before they turn 15 years old. The impacts of child, early and forced marriage are stark. It subjects young girls to violations of their right to health, education and safety. It raises the likelihood of girls dropping out of school. It increases the risk of complications or death due to childbirth. It pushes women and girls towards economic vulnerability. It increases the likelihood of domestic violence. Fundamentally, it means the loss of their childhood. And that is why several women's rights organizations and Oxfam Pilipinas have been working together to make the proposed *Girls Not Brides Act* a law – making child marriage illegal, where, if passed, any person who facilitates and/or performs a marriage would be criminally prosecuted.

In 2019, Senator Hontiveros, a Filipino politician and community advocate filed Senate Bill 1373, the '*Girls Not Brides Act of 2019*'. And on November 9, 2020 a historic moment was reached as the bill passed the third and final reading in

the Senate. As of this writing, only review in the House of Representatives remains.

Our projects with partners in the Philippines work to change local norms and laws that perpetuate violence and provide support to women and girls who are survivors of violence. Local women's advocates and organizations are at the heart of this work – organizations like the Girl Defenders Movement mobilized hundreds of people to comment on the proposed law and made sure that the perspectives of girls were incorporated into the amendments.

Shifting power in our movement is about making space for local leadership. This is critical to driving lasting community change. It is about ensuring that the people most impacted by an issue have the space and resources they need to drive the change they want to see. And it's about recognizing that charity alone cannot end poverty, because poverty is not just about money. It is about systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice. We must challenge the systems that keep people poor – that is the key to a just and sustainable future.

*Submitted by Oxfam Canada*