



# Resourcing girls

## The potential and challenges of girl- and youth-led organising

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## About this research

This research has been conducted in partnership with the Adolescent Girls Investment Plan (AGIP) coalition. AGIP is a global, intergenerational, feminist coalition co-chaired by Plan International and Akili Dada, and includes Amplify Girls, Box Girls Kenya, Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE/ODI), Breakthrough, Girls Not Brides, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Restless Development, Save the Children, and Women Deliver.

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Today, 1.8 billion young people make up one-quarter of the world's population, 600 million of whom are girls and young women. Yet increasingly visible efforts to support gender equality have tended to focus predominantly on adult women, and thus have not always transferred to on-the-ground benefits for girls and young people. Investing in localised girl- and youth-led organisations is proposed as a solution to this challenge, but research shows that between 2016 and 2021 only 1% of all official development assistance (ODA) for programmes addressing gender and adolescence reached localised girl- and youth-led organisations. There is currently also limited evidence as to how investing directly in girl- and youth-led work can lead to improvements in girls' lives and foster connections to broader gender-equitable development processes. The objective of this study is to explore the experiences of girl- and youth-led organisations, to understand the contributions they make within the broader ecosystem of gender equality, adolescent development and empowerment, as well as to investigate the challenges they face in carrying out and expanding their work.

## Methods

The report draws on a rapid evidence review of secondary literature as well as key informant interviews undertaken in 2023 to explore the characteristics, contributions and challenges of girl- and youth-led work. Individual and group key informant interviews were conducted with 22 girl- and youth-led organisations, 8 girl- and women-focused/feminist intermediary donors, and 3 monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning experts.

## Findings

### Characteristics of girl- and youth-led organisations and movements

The study mapped and profiled a diverse range of organisations, identifying differences in registration status, year of founding, number of staff, number of donors, type of funding and country presence. Overall, we found that adolescent girls and young people continue to remain

marginalised from accessing funding for their work, with girls and young people with disabilities the most under-funded. There is a dearth of data on girls and youth involved in girl- and youth-led work, presenting a gap in understanding the conditions and relationships that shape opportunities for girls to become change agents, and preclude others from doing so.

### Opportunities and contributions

The study found that girl- and youth-led organisations tackle a diverse range of issues facing girls and youth in their communities, including climate justice, sexual and reproductive health and rights, disability rights, child marriage, access to comprehensive sexuality education, economic empowerment and gender-based violence. Girl- and youth-led groups frame their impact on these issues in three ways: in relation to transformational social norm and behaviour change; in contributing to direct implementation of projects to benefit girls and youth at the community level; and in terms of the outcomes and skills developed by girls and youth involved in leading projects. However, groups face a common struggle with having fit-for-purpose tools and approaches to measure the impact of their work, and how to appropriately capture shifts in social norms, attitudes and behaviours attributable to their work.

### Challenges

The funding landscape for girls is complex and made up of many different actors and funding mechanisms, but investment in girl- and youth-led initiatives remains very limited – reflecting the broader challenge of ensuring that funding earmarked for civil society (especially in LMIC contexts) actually reaches civil society organisations. Major donors provide limited funding to youth-led organisations due to strict legal and financial requirements, whereas intermediaries and smaller organisations (especially those that focus on funding feminist or girl-led movements) generally have the most youth-friendly funding mechanisms. Overall, because of a dearth of accessible funding, youth-led organisations often rely on alternative sources of funding such as crowdfunding or donations, while yet others work without funding.

The growing interest in resourcing girls and youth presents an opportunity to better include girls and youth in impact measurement, but traditional impact and other performance measures were seen by study participants as misaligned with the capacities or work of girl- and youth-led organisations. Intermediaries and smaller organisations described taking steps to change current reporting culture towards documenting change in awareness and agency among adolescent girls and young women themselves rather than needing to evidence a shift in social norms change per se, and to pivot towards greater use of verbal and light-touch reporting requirements. At the same time, challenges remain in assessing the extent to which girl- and youth-led organisations are driving social change, or whether the empowering effects of girls' activities are extending to others in their community.

The unique cognitive, social, emotional and developmental transitions that young grantees are going through at their life stage means that not all grantees will remain advocates for their entire lives, or necessarily dedicate their career progression to working on social transformation. This has further implications for funding relationships.

## Conclusion

Contributing to the nascent evidence base on girl- and youth-led organisations, this report explores the opportunities, contributions and challenges that currently exist within this space. In light of the findings, we suggest there is a need to focus on how an inclusive, progressive and collective social change ecosystem might be fostered that leverages the potential of girl- and youth-led work. In particular, the report concludes by emphasising the importance of understanding the structural barriers that exclude certain girls from participating in girl- and youth-led organisations as this is central to ensuring that power dynamics are not replicated across these spaces. In particular, the report concludes by emphasising that there must be due attention to the structural barriers that exclude certain girls from participating in girl- and youth-led organisations to ensure that power dynamics

are not replicated across these spaces. The experiences of girl- and youth-led groups in accessing funding and reporting outcomes also shed light on implications for improving impact measurement and accountability processes so that these foster the potential of such groups to contribute to the broader ecosystem of social change rather than excluding groups that are less formalised and/or unregistered. Related to this, while celebrating girls' individual achievements – often on a shoestring – is undoubtedly important, girls' activities must be underpinned by movements for wider social change that demand structural transformation.

## Key recommendations

1. **Invest in developing fit-for-purpose impact measurement approaches across girl- and youth-led groups** by engaging girls as active agents in monitoring and evaluation processes that recognize the timeframe of social norms change and its intersection with girls' ages and life stage. Such efforts should also consider how young people's participation is contributing to the wider social change ecosystem and catalysing shifts at community, national and international levels.
2. **Pilot different resourcing models** that engage with a broader spectrum of organisation typologies to reflect the realities of girl- and youth-led organisations' priorities, outcomes, capacities and positioning within the social change ecosystem; and recognise the role of support structures, intergenerational solidarity, and intermediary linkages to wider change efforts in specific issues areas, from sexual and reproductive health and rights to climate change mitigation and adaptation.
3. **Invest in strengthening the evidence base on girl- and youth-led organisations and their impact** through longitudinal mixed methods research that explores the characteristics of girl-led groups (including who is involved and represented and who remains excluded); disaggregates funding flows; and attends to the role and evolution of a broad spectrum of groups.

# Introduction

Today, 1.8 billion young people make up one-quarter of the world's population, 600 million of whom are girls and young women (UN Women, 2024). Gender equality and girls' rights are increasingly visible in global and national development commitments: Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 calls for states to achieve gender equality by 2030; an increasing number of governments are beginning to adopt feminist foreign policies<sup>1</sup> to protect and promote the rights of women, girls and marginalised groups and increase their participation in decision-making; the Generation Equality campaign has accelerated collective action on achieving global gender equality; and there is mounting interest in the value of investing in women and girls (Patton et al., 2016; Lever et al., 2020; Papagiotti et al., 2022; Arutyunova et al., 2023; Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (PMNCH), 2023).

This increased interest, alongside pledges to advance gender equality, is noteworthy, but has not always transferred to on-the-ground benefits for girls. Part of the challenge is that efforts to promote gender equality have, until more recently, often only given lip service to girls' age-specific needs and instead focused predominantly on adult women (Walters, 2023). This, in turn, has also meant that broader momentum towards gender equality has not always translated into concomitant funding commitments in official development assistance (ODA)<sup>2</sup> flows. Research shows that only 5.5% of all ODA between 2016 and 2021 went to programmes addressing gender and adolescence; and within that limited amount, just 1% reached localised girl- and youth-led organisations that could help drive transformational and sustainable change in communities (Devonald et al., 2023a, 2023b).

In addition, and notwithstanding global political momentum, heterogeneous girls and youth face intersecting barriers to fully realising their capabilities. Recognising adolescence as a critical life stage of rapid physical, emotional, social and cognitive development during

which gender norms increasingly shape girls' and boys' trajectories and opportunities, there is a growing body of research investigating the types of interventions and implementation modalities that are most effective in advancing adolescent well-being outcomes across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Haberland et al., 2018; GAGE consortium, 2019; Baird et al., 2023). Alongside exploring the successes and bottlenecks of work that targets girls and youth as recipients of aid programming, there is also growing interest in understanding how investing directly in girl- and youth-led work<sup>3</sup> can lead to improvements in girls' lives, and the connections to broader gender-equitable development processes. In fact, young people have been hailed as torchbearers of gender equality and sustainable development, and as key actors in identifying solutions our world urgently requires (United Nations (UN), 2023). Understanding how girl- and youth-led organisations operate, and their positioning within the ecosystem of gender equality efforts, adolescent development and empowerment, and broader social change efforts, requires careful examination.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to gather evidence on the experiences of girl- and youth-led work across LMIC contexts. It draws on a rapid evidence review of secondary literature as well as key informant interviews with girl- and youth-led organisation members, intermediary organisations involved in funding girl- and youth-led groups, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) experts to explore the characteristics, contributions and challenges of girl- and youth-led work. The rest of this report is organised as follows: section 2 provides a review of the literature exploring the existing evidence base on youth participation and girls' movements; section 3 overviews the methodology adopted for this study; section 4 discusses findings from our key informant interviews, including case studies on girl- and youth-led work and the impacts that their interventions are having; and section 5 provides concluding reflections and recommendations.

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- 1 Countries that have developed feminist foreign policies include: Sweden (feminist foreign policy adopted in 2014); Canada (2017); France (2019); Mexico (2020); Spain (2021); Luxembourg (2021); Germany (2021); and Chile (2022) (UN Women, 2022)
  - 2 Official development assistance (ODA) is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as government aid with the explicit intent to promote the economic welfare and well-being of developing nations (OECD, 2023). It is considered to be a gold standard metric gauging the typology, amount and sector of foreign overseas aid spent in LMICs and in contexts of humanitarian crises. As such, it is critical to monitor and track changes in ODA over time to ensure that no population is left behind.
  - 3 The term 'girl- and youth-led work' in this report includes activities conducted by girl- and youth-led organisations and groups in all of their diversity, including work conducted by unregistered organisations, work that is conducted on a volunteer basis, and work that includes movement-building and activism. The authors recognise that there may be additional forms of girl- and youth-led organising that are not investigated in this report.

# Literature review

## Youth participation in the Global South

Since the early 2000s, the participation of adolescents and young people in political action to bring about social and political change – often outside of formal or institutional spaces – has received growing attention. Across the Global North and South, this is in part due to the visibility of young people within mass mobilisation during this period, from the Chilean student-led ‘Penguin Revolution’ in 2006, to the Arab Spring of the early 2010s. The Y’en a Marre youth movement in Senegal that began in 2011, and the mobilisation of Ethiopia’s Qeerroo youth movement in 2016, both resulted in the ousting of incumbent prime ministers (Jones et al., 2024). Although these movements have arguably not achieved lasting structural transformation (Bevins, 2023), the engagement of young people in local and transnational processes of political action has triggered significant interest in how their political agency can be further supported. This is evidenced by the development of global and national strategies by the Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), among others, to support young people’s participation at all levels of decision-making (Cuevas-Parra, 2024).

Efforts to support adolescent and youth participation in decision-making within formal institutions are often rooted in the recognition that younger people are competent social actors, with rights enshrined within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) to have their voices heard on issues that affect them (James and James, 2012). Youth participation can also be seen as a way to improve the impact of adult-led initiatives. Debates on young people’s participation thus often centre on how, and to what extent, this can be realised. An important typology that is often used to assess types of participation is the ‘ladder of participation’ devised by Roger Hart (1992), which defines different types and degrees of involvement in decision-making and action. At the lower rungs of the ladder are the manipulation of younger people by adults to further their own agendas, and their tokenistic or decorative inclusion

in activities where they have no real agency. The top of the ladder offers examples of meaningful participation such as adult-initiated but shared decision-making with young people, child-initiated but shared decision-making with adults, and young people initiating and direction actions.

While often used as a model of practice, Hart and others working on young people’s participation and decision-making have emphasised that the types of participation observed in the upper rungs of the ladder should not necessarily be interpreted as hierarchical. In particular, although youth-led and youth-initiated action may be an idealised form of participation, and processually empowering, in practice, structural and institutional factors may mean that adult involvement can support empowering outcomes (Hart, 1992; Treseder, 1997; Shier, 2001; Tisdall, 2015). Drawing on empirical work with young people, Cuevas-Parra (2022) observes how participation opportunities are impacted by young people’s social identities, contextual factors, and the structural inequalities that these generate. Young people who are marginalised on the basis of their social identity – for example, on the basis of their gender, race, class, language ability, sexuality or disability – may need particular types of support in different settings to participate. Differential and appropriate approaches to participation can thus be vital for youth decision-making and action on issues to be inclusive and transformative rather than unconsciously replicating existing power inequalities.

However, institutional efforts to channel the momentum and energy of young people’s activism into empowering outcomes through participatory approaches have frequently been met with practical challenges. Failures to support meaningful participation can result from the power inequalities that characterise adult–youth relations and shape social systems, and determine whose knowledge is perceived as valuable and who is thus entitled to have a say on a given matter. For example, adults’ perceptions of what young people are capable of, or what they might need in order to participate fully, result in young people’s exclusion from decision-making on grounds of their lack of competency (Gal and Duramy, 2015; Moran-Ellis and Tisdall, 2019). This can lead to the exclusion of young people with disabilities and younger adolescents, for example (Theobald et al., 2011). It is essential that power



relations are interrogated as part of efforts to support young people's participation and decision-making, otherwise their role will be limited to decoration, tokenism, and manipulation by adults (Hart, 1992; McMellon and Tisdall, 2020).

## Girls' movements: opportunities and challenges

The past decade has also been a period of increased global recognition and celebration of girls' activism and support for their capacity to mobilise other young people on social issues (Taft, 2014; Vanner, 2019; Raby and Sheppard, 2021; Allen and Green-Barteet, 2023). The increased allocation of various types of funding for girls' movements reflects the zeitgeist of interest in girls' agency and empowerment and its connection to gender-equitable development processes. This development reflects a positive shift away from girls' subordination, and a lack of political support for their activism by adults. In Northern contexts, this is because girls have historically been seen as incapable and decorative rather than political agents (Gordon, 2007; Taft, 2011) whilst in the Global South, girls have tended to be perceived as victims without agency or voice.

However, this growing interest in and attention to girls' mobilisation has surfaced another problem: the 'lifting up' of certain individual activist girls, with the result that girls' political agency is often narrowly framed within public discourse as the high-profile work of individuals (Mikel Brown, 2016; Loveday et al., 2023). This has been a particular problem within global development spaces, where decolonial feminist work has drawn attention to the way that the language of autonomy and choice conceptually severs girls' agency from the structural conditions and relationships that shape both the realities of their opportunities to be change agents, and what kinds of changes they are expected to embody (Sensoy and Marshall, 2010; Bent, 2013; Hesford, 2014).

There are three effects of an individualised lens that are worth highlighting here for their consequences for the resourcing of girls' movements. First, as already noted, framing activism as a matter of individual girls' self-confidence and initiative diverts attention away from the systemic barriers to girls' participation in activism that are highlighted within work on meaningful youth participation (Harris, 2004; Mikel Brown, 2016; Taft, 2020). One of the risks of this is that girls' organisations that have existing capacities related to privilege and advantage may be more able to effectively position themselves as fundable. Related

to this, and similarly to use of the term 'young person', the emphasis on 'girl' as a primary identifier for girls' activism collapses the heterogeneity of experiences, identities and priorities that comprise '*girlhood*', which are themselves shaped by girls' race, class, gender, age, sexuality, disability and other social markers (Erevelles and Nguyen, 2016; Vanner, 2019). The power dynamics that render certain girls and movements visible at certain moments are the very same dynamics that maintain structural gender inequality and must be addressed as an integral part of support for girls' movements.

The celebration of particular expressions of activism as appropriately empowering to girls also obscures the complexity of how girls exercise political agency within patriarchal systems. Work within girlhood studies has underlined that girls' navigation of these systems can lead to strategies for resistance that may be counterintuitive or ineffective (Gonick et al., 2009; Loveday et al., 2023). This should raise questions about which girl-led strategies and approaches should be funded, and to what extent there should be input from adults as to how to connect girls' enterprise with desired outcomes – especially adults organising within local feminist spaces whose interests and priorities may intersect with those of girls. A critical, relational analysis of agency recognises the importance of scaffolding and support for girls' activism. A focus on cross-generational opportunities for solidarity and what these look like in practice can help to overcome tensions that often emerge between celebration of individual girls on the one hand and honouring the collective nature of activism on the other (Vanner, 2019; Raby and Sheppard, 2021). Intergenerational work and scaffolding can also help 'behind the scenes' in creating space for girls to direct the focus of girl-led organisations and to assist them to access the types of funding their initiatives need (Edell et al., 2016). Not only is this important as a process, but in development contexts, evidence also points to the effectiveness of this latter approach in terms of outcomes such as shifting norms and transforming practices that harm girls (Marcus et al., 2017; Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2022).

The adoption of an intersectional approach that recognises how privilege and social identity shape representation and influence has been emphasised as key to collaborative intergenerational work that empowers rather than co-opts girls and addresses the problem of the homogenisation of girls' experiences. Developed by Black feminist theorists, 'intersectionality' refers to the compounding of inequalities and related harms at the

intersections of different social identities, such as race, class, gender, age, sexuality or disability. Inequalities are not experienced solely at the individual level; they are shaped by the ways that power operates across multiple interpersonal and structural domains (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2000). Inequality in feminist organising is not thus confined solely to the privileging of adult perspectives over those of girls, but to overlapping forms of marginalisation; for example, work on girlhood and disability has drawn attention to the ways that power relations around age, gender and disability constitute girls with disabilities as inherently vulnerable and lacking in the capacity to participate meaningfully in change processes (Erevelles and Nguyen, 2016). An intersectional approach also draws attention to the centralising of certain girls' voices and perspectives (Cooper, 2016); for example, when girls are listened to, those with more privileged backgrounds or social identities may be centred. Recognising how these dynamics impact on access to opportunities for support and financing is key to establishing funding mechanisms that address rather than reproduce inequalities.

Writing on the challenges of feminist organising in the post-2015 global development landscape, Okech and Musindarwezo (2019) observe that policy-makers often assume that the main challenges facing grassroots organising by girls and women are technical and material, such as lack of funds and capacity. Connected to this is a tendency for project funding for grassroots feminist groups to be linked to activity-based work, rather than collective and intergenerational organising and advocacy (Jad, 2007; Fraser, 2009; Okech and Musindarwezo, 2019). Abundantly problematised within critical feminist literature are the wave of efforts in the early 2000s to address gender inequality through corporate initiatives that emphasise social entrepreneurship and economic empowerment while obscuring the structural factors implicated in women and girls' marginalisation (Fraser, 2009; Bent, 2013; Shain, 2013; Gill and Orgad, 2017). A move away from these efforts within feminist funding principles towards open funding for girl-led activism may also be understood as an effort to address both the 'non-governmental organisation (NGO)-isation' of feminist organising, and the neoliberal co-optation of feminist ideas (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2018).

However, work on social norms change can only constitute part of the ecosystem of social change; funding for the provision of services and social protection is the other requirement. Challenging macroeconomic policies

through collective organising has been increasingly seen as key to ending the structural gender inequalities that are inextricably linked to neoliberal capitalism (Roberts, 2015). However, this arguably requires an ecosystem of stakeholders working towards social change at different scales, rather than a wholesale rejection of traditional actors; indeed, the notion of NGO-isation or institutionalisation as inherently antithetical to grassroots feminist organising overlooks the history of feminist activism in many contexts where NGOs have played an important role (Alvarez, 2009; Roy, 2017). Research has shown that coalitions of actors across the public and private realms can also offer possibilities for collective benefits for women and girls (Ferguson, 2015; Prügl, 2015). Those working within institutions also cannot be assumed to be unsupportive when it comes to the objectives of girl-led organisations (Ferguson, 2015; Eschle and Maiguashca, 2018).

Assessing the impact and efficacy of girl-led and girl-centred mobilisation can also be complicated and challenging. Although impact assessment is nearly always central to the evaluation of aid spending by donors, traditional models of M&E have been critiqued within feminist work on grant-making for their weighting towards donor strategic priorities and the failure of donors to provide opportunities for activists and leaders to define and assess impact (Ackerly, 2009; Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), 2021). Yet nonetheless, the growing literature on feminist funding principles emphasises the impact of girls' rights organising as a key rationale for the expansion of their access to funds. However, how to actually measure their impact in a way that aligns with an intersectional and grassroots approach is not properly addressed within this literature. This requires more attention; while existing modalities for evaluation have their limitations for capturing the impacts of girl-led initiatives and movements, there are risks of not measuring impact properly. Feminist monitoring, evaluation and learning principles emphasise the importance of understanding why gender and power relations exist and how they change as a result of interventions (Azevedo et al., 2019). Monitoring projects can not only help to disentangle what it is about an intervention that is effective and thus what activities might be sustained or rethought, but it can also support learning and accountability for future initiatives. Understanding what 'impact' means to girls can provide a first step for critically thinking about what types of monitoring can support rather than constrain their activities.

# Methodology

## Objective and research questions

The objective of this study is to explore the experiences of girl- and youth-led organisations and understand the contributions they make within the broader ecosystem of adolescent and youth empowerment and development, as well as to investigate the challenges they face in carrying out and expanding their work. This study seeks to answer three research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of girl- and youth-led organisations?
2. What are the major opportunities and contributions of girl- and youth-led work, including the impact that work generates in advancing girls' and youth well-being?
3. What are the major challenges that girl- and youth-led organisations face, including considerations on their resource base and impact measurement?

## Methods

To understand the state of the evidence on resourcing adolescent girl- and youth-led organisations and to contextualise findings from primary data collection, the research team conducted a desk review of grey and peer-reviewed published literature associated with girl- and youth-directed funding. We used the following search terms in reviewing the grey literature: 'Girl/youth-led', 'girl/youth-organisations', 'girl/youth-movements', 'feminist organisations', 'feminist funding', and 'women's organisations'. The academic literature review explored the same search terms, but was expanded to include work on youth- and girl-led activism in the Global South, intersectional and intergenerational feminist organising, participatory approaches to work with young people, and concepts relating to girls' agency. We used a snowballing approach to identify further work from key literature.

Supplementing the desk review, the research team conducted in-depth qualitative data collection to advance understanding on the characteristics and work of girl- and youth-led organisations, the challenges they face in resourcing their work, and their perceptions of impact. Tailored in-depth qualitative key informant interview (KII) tools were designed to understand the main areas of interest. While the semi-structured interview guides focused on capturing data in alignment with the three research

questions, there was also a degree of flexibility whereby interviewees had the opportunity to discuss themes of relevance to their work and to the research objectives.

In order to capture the perspectives of the community-based girls and youth these organisations serve, the research team gave girl- and youth-led organisations the opportunity to carry out a brief open-ended survey with the groups of girls and youth they seek to serve through their initiatives. The research team provided organisations with the opportunity to co-refine a set of draft questions prepared by the research team.

## Research sample

Individual and group key informant interviews were conducted with 22 girl- and youth-led organisations (see Box 1). Three girl- and youth-led groups were able to conduct further research with their constituents and provided written testimonials to this end.

In order to contextualise the experiences and challenges of girls and youth in the broader ecosystem, 8 girl- and women-focused/feminist intermediary donors and 3 monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) experts were also approached as key informants. Critically, researchers did not solely contact girl- and youth-led groups that are (or had been) funded by intermediary girl-focused and feminist donors. Researchers approached organisations that were (or are) funded by a diverse range of donors, to give a breadth of perspectives. They also spoke with groups that were not receiving any funding at the time.

### Box 1: What do we mean by 'girl-led' and 'youth-led'?

When using these terms, we mean organisations that self-identify as girl-led or youth-led, where girls or youth lead in all aspects of the organisation, as individuals or as a group, to design the projects and make decisions on organisational priorities and budgets. Although adults may be involved in a supportive role, they are not involved in a leadership capacity. These organisations focus on issues pertinent to girls and youth, who are the main populations of interest for their interventions.





Verbal consent was obtained from all respondents, and the study followed robust ethical and safeguarding protocols, including core principles drawn from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) Ethics Principles for Research and Evaluation. To preserve the confidentiality of respondents, authors have anonymised quotes from all participant groups and refer to them using letters, from A–V. For selected case studies, written informed consent was obtained from girl- and youth-led organisations, approving the mention of their organisational name, location and organisational representative(s).

During the inception phase of the research, a stakeholder mapping was developed in partnership with the Adolescent Girls Investment Plan's (AGIP) coalition members to identify key intermediary funds to interview. The sample of girl- and youth-led organisations followed a snowballing sampling strategy, whereby participants from girl- and youth-led groups were identified by a snowballing process, including via recommendations from research participants, who were able to refer other credible participants. Of 33 key informant interviews (KIs), 29 were conducted in English, 3 in Spanish and 1 in French. All KIs were held using Microsoft Teams. For qualitative

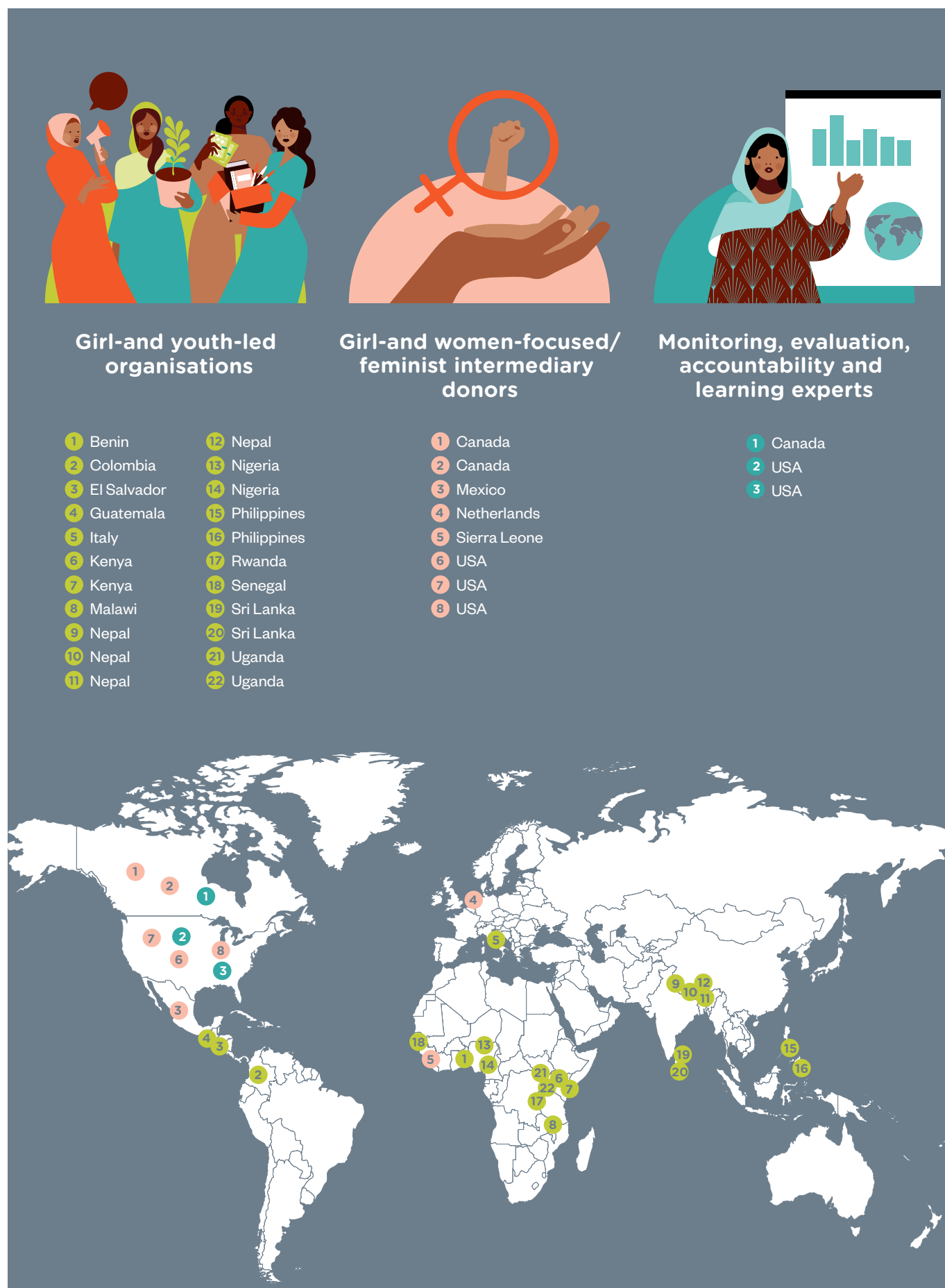
analysis, KIs were (where necessary) translated into English, transcribed and thematically coded. The research team drew on their experience in qualitative research to synthesise findings from the qualitative dataset and frame them within the context of the research objectives.

In determining the sample of girl- and youth-led groups, the major inclusion criterion was that the group self-identified as girl- or youth-led. Additionally, researchers strived to ensure that the groups represented were geographically diverse. Figure 1 showcases how the sample was organised geographically.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the researchers connected with girl- and youth-led groups with a wide range of thematic interests. The sample included girl- and youth-led organisations whose activities ranged from direct programming and delivery of folic acid tablets to adolescent girls, to community mobilisation on climate justice, to technical computer training for adolescent girls with disabilities, to economic empowerment training as an entry point for increasing adolescents' sexual and reproductive health uptake, to organising advocacy initiatives across universities to prevent gender-based violence.

4 The geographic distribution of intermediaries and monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) experts, reflects where their organisational affiliation is headquartered. The individual representatives we spoke with most often worked remotely or through regional hubs present all over the world.

Figure 1: Qualitative research sample





## Study limitations

The methodology adopted for this study and the findings reported here need to be viewed in light of some limitations. First, although research participants were offered the opportunity to connect via Microsoft Teams or WhatsApp, this precluded the participation of individuals and groups without stable internet connectivity, or those without digital access. Second, the research team was not able to contact girl- and youth-led groups working in humanitarian contexts, although these initiatives do exist and are worth additional inquiry. Third, this study includes the perspectives of girl-focused and feminist donors but the perspectives of other actors involved in resourcing

this work, including NGOs and multilateral donors, are not captured. This is a limitation, as the mechanisms and rationale through which a wider pool of donors chose to fund girls and youth is not captured in this study but would be useful to incorporate in follow-up research, as well as understanding the constraints that prevent them from funding this work. Finally, this study is not an evaluation whereby investments in programmes that are girl- and youth-led are compared with investments in programmes that are not girl- and youth-led. Although we do not consider this to be a limitation as such, as impact evaluations might not be conducive to this type of community-led work, it is important to include this caveat here.



Savings club adolescent members in Southern Province, Rwanda © Nathalie Bertrams/ GAGE 2024



# Findings

## Characteristics of girl- and youth-led organisations and movements

A comprehensive mapping and profiling of girl- and youth-led organisations is lacking in the evidence base, most likely due to the existence of multiple definitions of what constitutes girl- and youth-led work. However, recent work seeking to map the state of youth and young feminist-led organising globally indicates that the vast majority of girl- and youth-led groups operate on funding of below US\$5,000 per year, with many organisations working with significantly less or even no income at all (Thapa, 2017; Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) and FRIDA (The Young Feminist Fund), 2018).

The sample of girl- and youth-led organisations included in this study was very varied in terms of their profiles (see Figures 2a to 2f). There were substantial differences, including in: registration status (close to 80% were registered); year of founding (53% were founded since 2020); number of staff (the majority have either 6–10 staff members or more than 10, though 10% have no staff members and work exclusively through volunteers); number of donors (close to 40% rely on a single source of funding and more than 10% have not secured funding); type of funding (60% have project-based funding); and country presence (more than half have a presence at both the community and national levels).

There is limited literature that comprehensively profiles the individual characteristics of girls and youth involved in girl- and youth-led organisational work and activism. A recent report by Plan International (Diaconu and Fergus, 2023), which compiled mixed-methods findings from one of the largest global surveys on girls' and young women's activism, found that approximately 65% of girl and young women activists lived in urban areas or cities, approximately 1 in 10 identified as internally displaced, and 62% had completed higher education. Although these figures are indicative of girls and youth who are predominately urban and well-educated, it remains difficult to draw conclusive findings due to a lack of longitudinal trend analyses on these characteristics.

Primary data collected for this study finds that adolescent girls and youth, as a category, continue to remain marginalised from accessing funding for their work. Within the girl and youth cohort, girls and youth with disabilities

were the populations most frequently mentioned, by girl-focused and feminist intermediary donors and by girls and youth themselves, as groups that are significantly under-reached and under-funded. For this reason, specific feminist grant calls to resource girl- and young feminist-led disability justice and rights collectives (Purposeful, 2023) are worthy of mention, although the extent of financing youth-led disability groups more broadly remains unclear.

## Opportunities and contributions

### Girl- and youth-led work

The girl- and youth-led organisations taking part in our study tackle a diverse range of issues affecting girls and youth in their communities. We encountered groups that are addressing climate justice, sexual and reproductive health and rights, disability rights, child marriage, access to comprehensive sexuality education, economic empowerment, and gender-based violence, among others. Data from FRIDA (The Young Feminist Fund) underscores a recent increase in young feminist-led organisations working on abortion rights and climate justice, highlighting increased attention to bodily integrity and climate issues (FRIDA, 2022). The modalities through which girls and youth tackle these diverse thematic areas is equally varied: from direct programming in schools, information-sharing, awareness-raising, social norm change efforts, community health outreach, and policy and legal advocacy.

In the following section, we include examples and illustrative case studies of girl- and youth-led work, in order to profile the broad range of interests and activities specific to their contexts. Each case study follows the same format: the 'identifying the problem' section describes the situational challenge facing girls and youth in a specific context, which the organisation seeks to impact. The 'approach taken' section delineates how the organisation tackles these challenges. The 'learning' section explores what the organisation is learning through its interventions and how it perceives its impact. Finally, we highlight identified 'recommendations' the organisation would like to see from the broader funding and MEAL ecosystem. All sections include key quotes from representatives of the girl- and youth-led organisations involved to further nuance their work.

Figure 2a: Registration status

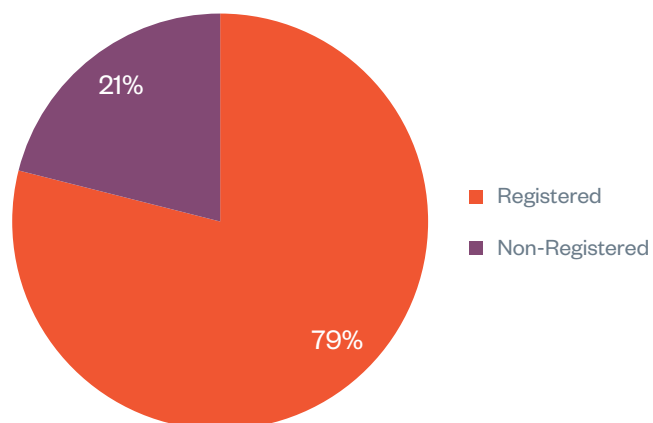


Figure 2d: Type of organisational presence

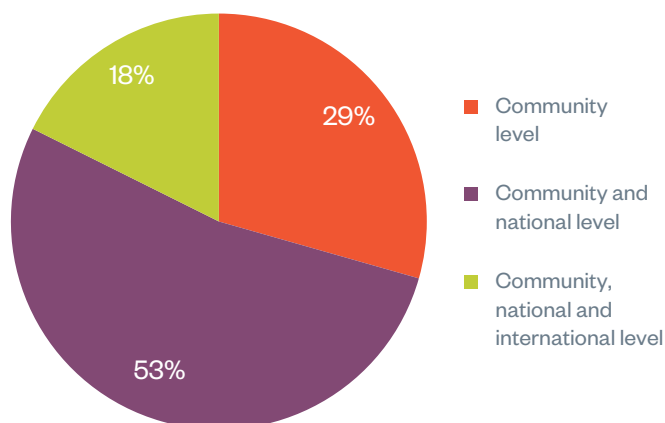


Figure 2b: Year founded

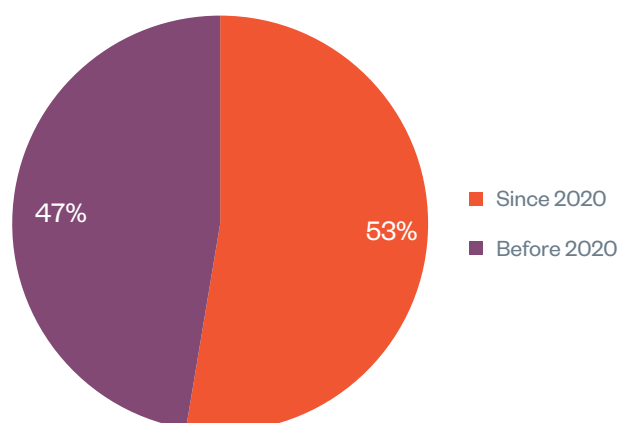


Figure 2e: Current number of donors

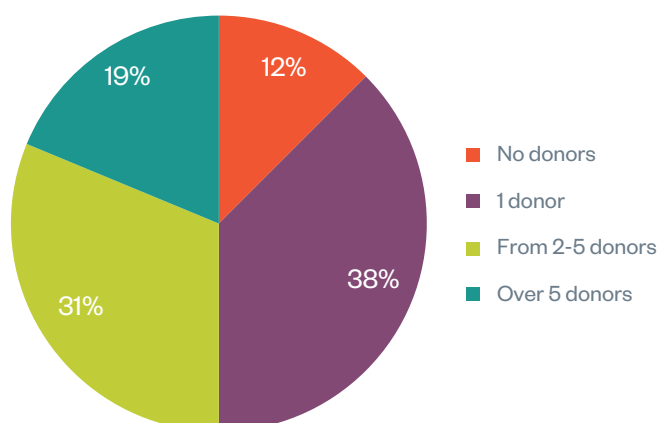


Figure 2c: Number of staff members

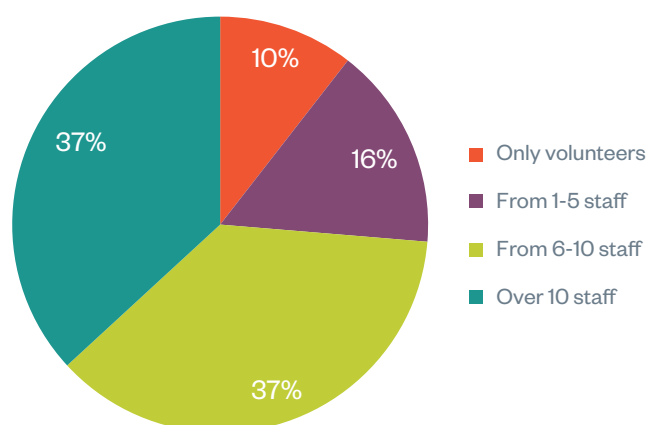
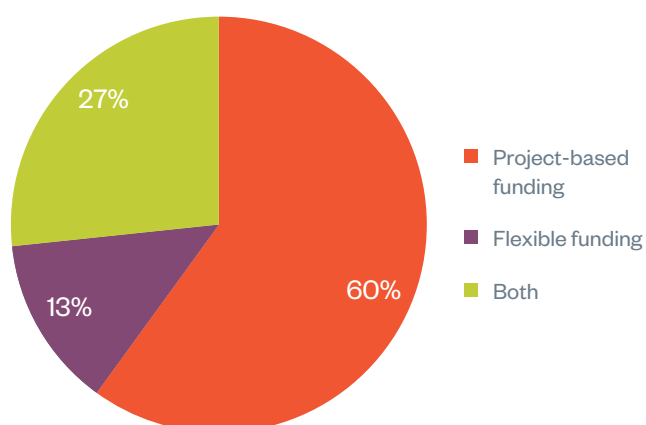


Figure 2f: Current type of funding



## Case study 1: Community work by and with young women with disabilities

### Identifying the problem



Across Nepal, youth with disabilities lack opportunities to develop their individual and collective capabilities. Due to stigma and lack of knowledge on their needs and rights, many adolescents with disabilities drop out or disengage from school, lack access to banking systems, remain jobless, and have no opportunity to fully participate in society. Young women with disabilities are doubly marginalised, as discriminatory gender norms—especially around mobility and marriageability—preclude their access to services.

*'I've come to realise how important this kind of work is, because a lot of times, especially in bigger organisations, the lived experience of adolescents and young people with disabilities is not factored in.'*  
(Laxmi, founder and Executive Director, Access Planet)

### Approach taken



Led by young women with disabilities and working towards the rights and empowerment of young women and youth with disabilities, Access Planet focuses on five thematic areas:

- Computer and technology skills training for education and employability – differentiated by type of disability or impairment.
- Career counselling and access to job-related training.
- Cross-domain awareness-raising, including on adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights, puberty, gender-based violence prevention and response, menstrual hygiene management, and economic rights.
- Leadership and empowerment-building through sports.
- Advocacy with government and non-government stakeholders to advance the rights of young women with disabilities.

*'We are self-led. We are young women with disabilities, advocating for others with disabilities. We face so many issues ourselves. We have experienced lack of guidance and support ourselves, so we realise what others are facing.'* (Laxmi)

### Learning



Feedback loops from project participants have helped Access Planet grow and adapt its work to make it increasingly appropriate and impactful for girls with disabilities. Intervention reports are shared with project participants to understand whether objectives were met and to identify areas for improvement. Access Planet carefully monitors its social media accounts to make sure the organisation is reaching beyond its communities. Although it monitors impact, much of the reporting tends to be donor-led, which is difficult when receiving numerous very small grants, all with different and substantial reporting requirements. Although donors are getting better at asking for a broader range of impact – including photographs, stories and narratives – reporting requirements are still not disability-friendly and reports are very time-consuming to produce.

*'Girls and youth are in the beginning of their careers – if they are well resourced, well capacitated, it will have the best and longest impact. We have brought girls with disabilities out of the house for the very first time. This is creating the largest impact because it is the youngest generations. If their capacity is built, they will impact the entire future generation.'*  
(Laxmi)

### Recommendations



- Make funding opportunities more accessible for youth with disabilities, and encourage donors funding the same organisation to harmonise their reporting requirements.
- Impact monitoring should be more disability-friendly, including through support in acquiring and using assistive devices, and specific to the type of impairment that a young person has.

*'Funding is a lifeline, but it's still very hard for marginalised groups to access funding. Feminist grants are changing the landscape a little bit but the grant application process for many other grants is difficult for us to understand, and we can barely apply. These things need to change. Please reach the left-out groups.'* (Laxmi)



## Case study 2: Advancing climate justice

### Identifying the problem



Highly reliant on small-scale, rainfed agriculture, people in Malawi remain dependent on increasingly unpredictable climate patterns. Due to changing precipitation, increases in temperature, high population growth, rapid deforestation and soil erosion, the economy is increasingly susceptible to climate shocks. When the Green Girls Platform, a youth-led initiative, began educating girls and young women in rural Malawi about climate change issues, they realised that there are specific challenges that girls face as a result of climate change and the various instances of climate-related violence that accompany it that are rarely discussed. The group shifted its focus to addressing climate-related violence against girls in their communities.

*'One of the girls asked us, "If I am beaten on my way to draw water because it's far now, is that something that can be attributed to climate change?" And then there were more issues, like girls having to drop out of school because they have to walk longer distances to fetch firewood and water, so it's too late for them to get dressed and go to class. Also girls getting married off because families are hungry.'*

(Joy Munthali, CEO Green Girls Platform)

### Approach taken



This youth-led organisation works through four thematic areas:

1. Raising awareness of climate change and associated risks of violence through community outreach entry points, including schools and community centres.
2. Policy advocacy, by lobbying and engaging with local and national government on policy changes that include gender and youth perspectives in climate policy.
3. Girls' empowerment by providing marketable skills training and safe spaces for girls.
4. Climate justice partnerships to collectively demonstrate how climate change disproportionately affects girls and youth – particularly those who are most vulnerable and those living in rural areas.

Funding was very difficult to obtain initially as donors required organisational registration, fiscal sponsorship and evidence of impact strategies. The group worked without funding for more than two years until they obtained flexible funding from a feminist intermediary.

*'There is no toolkit that helps you to get started or get funding or get registered, and so we had to learn it the hard way. It was great to eventually find a donor to work alongside us, help us meet other girls, other groups, other donors, and generally connect with others.'*

(Joy Munthali)

### Learning



In the past five years, the organisation has been able to reach approximately 7,500 young women and girls across Malawi, many of whom are now negotiating for climate change and climate justice at the community, national and global levels. The organisation is committed to internal learning agendas – which they want to strengthen – and relies on dialogue with girls and youth in the community to understand how to improve its approaches. Working as part of this organisation has also profoundly impacted staff, by requiring them to step into leadership and community role-model positions, afforded with a deep appreciation that girls are not idle recipients of money and of programming but are actively changing their society.

*'Our work needs more breathing time. We can't just do impact in a year. Girls come back to us, saying "We like the way that your work makes us feel, we like that you make us feel involved. You make us feel seen." How do we measure that? There is no indicator for how young people feel about working with you.'*

(Joy Munthali)

### Recommendation



Allow grantees to drive impact reporting.

*'If we can shift from making it about a donor to making it about the impact that's on the ground and understand what the organisation is actually doing and why, that would really help us to get some headway in maximising impact.'*

(Joy Munthali)

## Case Study 3: Art as social transformation



### Identifying the problem

In this country, gender-based violence is highly prevalent and affects the safety, dignity, mental health, and human rights of women and girls. Here, rates of violence against women and girls exist alongside multiple forms of social violence, including organised crime and gang crime. Girls face particularly high risks of sexual violence, often carrying multiple and far-reaching negative health consequences into the life course. In this context, violence against girls is highly normalised.



### Approach taken

This young woman-led organisation works to build safe spaces for young adolescent girls and youth, with two aims: first, to sensitise and inform girls about the harms of gender-based violence; and to train and practice healing and healthy relationships based on a conscious awareness of gender, rights and peace. Through identifying safe spaces in schools and communities, this organisation works through play-pedagogy and art-based methodologies (including installation, painting, journalling), placing emotions, feelings and one's body at the core of a healing and learning journey of growth.

*'We use play as a way to learn, but also as a way to communicate some of these difficult issues ... We also quickly realised the power of art as a form of expression for girls to learn about gender and sexual violence, but also to open up avenues of communication and support for victims through art.'* (Girl-and youth-led organization (GYLO T))



### Learning

This organisation has not been conducting formal monitoring and evaluation of its work, partly because it has limited staff, and partly because it is refining its impact tools. However, the organisation has recently adopted the Most Significant Change tool to measure its results from the perspective of the girls and youth it reaches out to. Through this exercise, it is learning about how its programmes make a difference to girls' lives. It has learnt that the most significant change stemming from its work is that girls feel listened to and heard. Girls are gaining self-importance and self-esteem, sometimes leading girls to organically partake in delivering organisational interventions, or in setting up offshoot committees of their own.

The organisation's work also seems to have intergenerational effects: mothers have mentioned learning through their daughters and together initiating family and community networks of trust and support. Girls and youth are also able to identify violent actions and instances of violence, demonstrating a breakdown in the normalisation of abuse.

*'They feel that they have a voice, they feel that they can set limits and say no, even within their families. They are better able to negotiate, they feel better, and they are able to communicate with others.'* (GYLO T)



### Recommendation

Support youth groups in multiple ways

*'We were lucky to eventually find people who supported us through funds, through providing access to spaces and networks, but also through teaching us the importance of entrepreneurship and striving to be self-sustainable.'* (GYLO T)

## Case study 4: Interventions on girl and youth health and nutrition

### Identifying the problem



In Nepal, traditional gender norms prevent girls from freely and fully accessing their health and rights, including preventing their access to nutritious food, health information and services, and ability to exercise their voice and agency. Whilst the highly decentralised government offers avenues for localised initiatives, rural pockets of the country seem cut off from information and services altogether. The lack of knowledge on health and nutrition especially among adolescent girls and youth in rural communities led Bonita Sharma, founder of Social Changemakers and Innovators (SOCHAI), to dedicate her life to improving the health and nutrition of adolescent girls and young Nepali women and build avenues for their empowerment.

*'SOCHAI means idea in Nepali language. Like our name suggests, we try to create new ideas and new thought processes to bring about change in our community through youth engagement.'*  
(Bonita Sharma, SOCHAI Co-founder and CEO)

### Approach taken



*'Without the active involvement or the engagement of youth, nothing is effective when you actually start implementing it.'*  
(Bonita Sharma)

SOCHAI is a young women-led organisation that works to improve the health, nutrition and socio-economic status of young women and girls. SOCHAI's direct programming targets pregnant and lactating mothers, adolescents, children, and female community health volunteers by training and mobilising young people who, in turn, act as active implementers across communities. Through this model, youth work with youth. Youth are trained on implementing adolescent school health and nutrition programmes, providing nutrition counselling to new mothers using SOCHAI-made Nutribeads bracelet (to inform on appropriate infant feeding schedules), Menstruation bracelet (to monitor the menstrual cycle) and Iron Folic Acid bracelet (to guide on iron folic acid supplementation for anemia prevention), conducting community nutrition assessments and coordinating with local municipalities to align on local and national nutrition interventions.

SOCHAI also implements school-based (and out-of-school-based) health and nutrition bootcamps for adolescents, involving intensive four-day trainings on adolescent-related topics including water, sanitation and hygiene; sexual and reproductive health and rights; and nutrition; coupled with soft-skills and capacity building trainings. Additionally, SOCHAI works with the most vulnerable women at greatest risk of poor health outcomes, by providing skills-to-work training. SOCHAI is also involved in a vast range of community and national advocacy for inclusive policies on adolescent, youth and vulnerable mothers' health and nutrition.

### Learning



The SOCHAI approach has a multiplying effect, whereby training and equipping young people themselves to implement projects at the community level has allowed them to reach over 3,400 young mothers and children, over 45 schools, close to 5,000 adolescents and distribute more than 5,000 education bracelets. Aside from numbers reached, SOCHAI is changing behaviour: adolescent girls are demanding nutritious school meals from their school principals, girls are requesting iron folic tablets from their local leaders as part of a national weekly iron supplementation programme which had been bottlenecked, and girls are increasingly involved in setting up school kitchen-garden and monitoring their menstrual hygiene.

*'Someone told me that they look up to me as an inspiration and I am the only young person who has done something in public health on their own, instead of working in an INGO. As a young person, I do see a future in this country and I can do something for my community.'*  
(Bonita Sharma)

### Recommendation



Increase funding and trust for youth-led initiatives if donors or organisations are serious on adolescent and youth well-being, even if youth organisations have little experience.

*'For three years, I was doing everything voluntarily, so there were a lot of doubts and there were a lot of comments from people around me. But once you get that formal recognition, your family, your friends, your community, your network, and even the government stakeholders, they start respecting you.'* (Bonita Sharma)

## Case study 5: Spotlight on girls and youth advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights

### Identifying the problem



Although many girl- and youth-led organisations tackle a multitude of thematic areas through their work, addressing young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights is a cross-cutting area that many choose to focus on. Adolescents and young people globally face notable obstacles to realising and exercising their sexual and reproductive health and rights – including freely defining one's sexuality and gender expression, deciding when and with whom to be sexually active, understanding how to safely access contraception and safe abortion, and having access to information and services to achieve all these things without discrimination. Although accessing sexual and reproductive health and rights is critical to individual and collective health, survival and well-being, and notwithstanding the measurable benefits to investment in adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health and rights, these remain out of reach for many young people. In many countries, recent roll-backs on political and financial commitments and discrimination against women and girls' rights have delayed progress on sexual and reproductive health and rights targets.

There is evidence in the literature to show that girl and youth groups are a successful entry point to reach adolescent girls and promote sexual and reproductive health and rights services (Bergstrom and Ozler, 2021). Below, authors profile a range of girl- and youth-led organisations that are working to advance young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights in very different communities, in ways that make sense to their organisational capacities and the lived reality of girls and youth in those communities. They are addressing social norms in horizontal, rather than top-down, ways that make sense to the communities they seek to serve.

### Approach taken



***'We try to eliminate the invisible borders that exist in our society against girls.'* (GYLO M)**

***'[In our context], large agencies cannot talk about abortion from a rights-based angle because abortion is legally restricted. As an unregistered youth network, we can play that role. We can advocate for safe abortion. We can talk to young people about safe abortion.'* (GYLO F)**

The girl- and youth-led groups we spoke to tend to implement sexual and reproductive health and rights initiatives through educational, health or community entry points, or in digital spaces, and some of the larger organisations have projects across multiple spheres. Their work tends to focus on supplementing the scant information on sexual and reproductive health and rights provided in schools, colleges and health centres, by raising awareness of the importance of the subject for adolescents and youth, as well as providing comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) that is age-appropriate and relevant. Some groups conduct dedicated outreach with community health workers to sensitise them on girls' rights to abortion and family planning. Many groups adopt cascading models, whereby they work with and train youth advisors or youth champions who, in turn, conduct community mobilisation campaigns and advocacy initiatives in their own communities, to break taboos around abortion, pregnancy prevention (at times including distributing contraception) and promoting positive masculinities.

One group launched an app to demystify sexual and reproductive health-related medical language, which was proving inaccessible and confusing for many girls, and explains issues relating to sexual and reproductive health and rights, contraception, menstrual hygiene, sexuality, and breast cancer prevention, all in youth-friendly language. Another group organises entrepreneurship training for teenage mothers, aiming to increase their financial autonomy so that they can access and pay for sexual and reproductive health and rights services autonomously.

A few groups also work on increasing knowledge and awareness of gender-based violence, and even document its occurrence. We heard from groups working strictly online, setting up anonymous digital portals for individuals to document cases of gender-based violence, providing users with advice and further avenues for support. We also heard from a youth group that conducts university-wide campaigns to document instances of violence occurring on campus, and has launched campus-wide surveillance networks to mitigate the risk of gender-based violence.

Some groups working on sexual and reproductive health and rights issues underscored that their work is particularly sensitive in their contexts. In fact, some girl- and youth-led organisations choose to remain unregistered and operate 'under the radar', as their work on safe abortion, for example, challenges the political environment they operate in and formally registering would increase risks to their programmes and, possibly, to their lives. This notwithstanding, groups we spoke to remain committed to risky work, and the precaution they take is remaining legally anonymous and unregistered. For such groups, having recognition from donors about their work seems particularly relevant.



## Learning



Girls and youth reflect on and measure impact of sexual and reproductive health and rights programming in very different ways. The extent of their programmes' reach also differs based on organisational capacity and theories of change singular to each organisation: some work very locally in specific neighbourhoods only, while others aim to have nation-wide presence. Through a mix of direct implementation of sexual and reproductive health and rights projects, and indirect involvement through training youth advocates who target youth in local communities, the youth-led organisation YUWA has reached and empowered 66,700 young people in Nepal, led the first nation-wide comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) conference, and secured a local government commitment to invest in young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights. Through community safe space programming and community health outreach, one organisation has reached around 7,000 girls and young men in Rwanda and expanded their geographic presence. The Ochanya Humanitarian Foundation has graduated more than 20 teenage mothers from entrepreneurship training, having learnt a trade from which they are now earning money. Other organisations have grown their social media presence and amplified their digital reach, while others have been recognised by local or national governments, and sit in forums such as youth task forces. Others still have increased their partnerships with like-minded organisations and groups, which is a measure of expanding their presence.

Many more girls and youth discussed the impact of their work on changing social norms – which is the area they are most interested in impacting – although individual, family and community-behaviour change measurement in an area they would like to further develop and strengthen.

*'The organisation's impact in the community is tangible. There's a noticeable increase in awareness and proactive efforts related to sexual and reproductive health. The positive changes are becoming embedded in our community's fabric.'*  
(GYLO Q)

## Recommendation



Taken together, girl- and youth-led groups call on the donor ecosystem to provide multiple avenues of support for young people's organisations, such as funding, capacity-building, and opportunities for networking and partnering with other girls and youth.

*'Aside from funding, it's important for donors to realise that these are young people and it's really important to give them capacity training and open space to learn.'*  
(GYLO S)



## Common threads across girl- and youth-led work

Although some of the activities implemented by girls and youth resemble the modalities of other implementing agencies (NGOs and community-based organisations), such as delivering capacity-building training for girls, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), safe space programming, community health outreach, and gender equality advocacy, girl- and youth-led organisations perceive that their added value is their ability to engage on a shared level with their target group. Across the diverse modalities of their activism and programme implementation, girl- and youth-led organisations share a key objective of challenging discriminatory social norms. Social norms – broadly understood as a set of culturally shared beliefs about what is acceptable within a social group – are diffused throughout the social fabric of communities and embedded in their component parts, from law, to economic institutions and schools (Cookson et al., 2023). The main way that girls and youth describe challenging social norms is through embodying and role-modelling behaviour that challenges discriminatory norms about what a girl should be or should do, in order that girls in the future may see more possibilities for their lives:

*We tackle the challenges we faced while growing up, so that other girls can have a better future not going through what we went through. It's not because we were told. It's because we went through that too.* Girl- and youth-led organisation (GYLO) L<sup>5</sup>.

Girls and youth also expressed that they bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas to community, national and international work, and are able to inject creativity and dynamism to their initiatives. The often-spontaneous ways they organise mean that they are ‘able to unearth or surface new issues that may not necessarily even be within the purview of more established organisations that are set in their ways’ (GYLO B). As discussed in the case studies, this may include coordinating and running intensive adolescent bootcamps, leveraging social media and digital platforms, and working in youth-friendly ways using youth-friendly language.

## The impact of girl- and youth-led action

The interviews also explored with girls and youth the impact they perceived that their work was having at the community, national or international levels. Every girl- and youth-led group we spoke with discussed impact as related to transformational social norm and behaviour change. Although some mentioned their impact as related to changing or challenging a policy, and the impact and numbers of reach of their direct programmes, groups faced a common struggle with having fit-for-purpose tools/approaches with which to measure the behavioural impact of their work, and how to appropriately capture social shifts attributable to it. Boxes 2a, 2b and 2c illustrate some of the ways that grantees explain the impact of their work.



A 16-year-old Lebanese girl in school © Marcel Saleh/GAGE 2024

<sup>5</sup> To preserve the confidentiality of respondents, we have anonymised quotes from all our participant groups and refer to them here using letters from A–V.

### Box 2a: Policy, lobbying and advocacy impact

Some girl- and youth-led work seeks to impact influential networks, opinion leaders and decision-makers at international, national and community/district levels, in order to demand the implementation and upholding of youth-responsive legislation and frameworks. Dialoguing with decision-makers also serves to bring relevant issues for girl and youth well-being to the table by girls and youth themselves. Examples of policy, lobbying and advocacy impact are highlighted here:

- *The adolescents we worked with have become aware, they are demanding their rights to local stakeholders and policy-makers. At the local health facility, health programmes for adolescents were non-existent, and have gradually started to be implemented. This was a very proud moment for us. (GYLO D)*
- *The government almost repealed the abortion law and that was done through a lot of community mobilising, and we were one of the leading groups. The legislation was not changed, but it was almost done and that was one of our biggest success stories. (GYLO F)*
- *We are one of the very few youth organisations that's recognised by the Ministry of Health and are part of official health committees – it was a long struggle to be a part of that. But now, we are able to provide advice to the government from a youth lens and influence official policies. For example, there was an interim guideline on SRHR [sexual and reproductive health and rights] and new laws on SRHR across the country, and we managed to lobby for separate guidelines on adolescent-specific and adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health services and disability-friendly SRHR services. (GYLO J)*
- *We were also able to get a local government commitment to allocate a percentage of their monthly budgets to young people's SRHR in one of the districts. We see movement at the policy level, we are collaborating with ministries for the inclusion of CSE [comprehensive sexuality education] in the national curriculum. Due to our government outreach and sensitisation, they took the initiative and lead on a national-level conference on CSE, which is a good achievement. (GYLO K)*

### Box 2b: Direct programming impact

Some girl- and youth-led organisations assume the responsibility for direct project implementation, including the rollout of programmes and interventions. This may include the direct training of youth mobilisers, the delivery of learning content within schools, the distribution of contraception at health centres, and a variety of tangible activities at the community level. Examples of direct programming impact are provided here:

- *We measure impact in several ways, we monitor our social media outreach, the number of talks we give over a certain period of time, the number of rape tests that girls get, the number of rapid HIV tests we roll out ... But what is more interesting for us, when we talk about gender-based violence and when we encounter cases of gender-based violence and work with girls, we have no desertion rates. That is to say, the group starts and finishes. (GYLO M)*
- *We requested with the community chairman and counsellor that they put security lights in dangerous corners of our community, corners where girls were getting raped. They put them up, but then people removed them and stole the wires. We went back to the chairman and requested security lights again, and a camera. They accepted. (GYLO G)*
- *Most of the teachers we work with have now agreed that CSE is something that young people need. First, the schools now preach a full bully-free zone, which was a very big achievement. Because of our CSE interventions, school members have understood how cat-calling can affect gender and sexual identities and adolescent well-being. Second, we see changes in the understanding of boundaries and students now know about sexual consent. (GYLO K)*
- *Impact for me, is that the community trusts us – they know we contribute to mitigating the numbers of teenage pregnancy, preventing violence and preventing the spread of sexually transmitted infections. (GYLO M)*
- *Also, the work that we've done with the deaf community in our country in terms of sensitising them on sexual and reproductive health and building their capacities to talk about sexual and reproductive health and having sensitised and trained sign language interpreters on sexual and reproductive health. So these are some impacts that we have seen, but they're not necessarily perfectly documented. (GYLO F)*

### Box 2c: Impacts on behaviour change and mindset shifts

The majority of girl- and youth-led work seeks to initiate social norm shifts intended to challenge common perceptions and expectations about girls' behaviour. Impact insights into attitudinal and collective behaviour changes as a result of girl- and youth-led work are highlighted here:

- *We believe in the community, we don't do anything that girls and young women don't suggest themselves, because this is how we make impact. We hear parents calling us, asking us how their girls can join our groups. Girls are speaking out boldly without any fear about how amazing a girl child should be. (GYLO L)*
- *Young people are capacitated enough that they are able to advocate for their own sexual and reproductive health and rights. One of our youth advocates recently conducted a podcast with her own mother that was focused around menstruation and contraceptives and communicating with her mother. Being able to talk about those things freely with your own family is a great achievement for us because generally, we live in a closed society. (GYLO K)*
- *We have young health workers and medical students that had their values clarified on abortion. This is a very great achievement because abortion wasn't a topic on which health workers were taught and they now accept giving the service of safe abortion because they understand the risks, they understand the reasons. (GYLO O)*

Critically, impact outcomes for girl- and youth-led organisations relate not only to the project outcomes that target communities, but also the outcomes and skills developed by girls and youth involved in leading the project. Girl- and youth-led projects often provide opportunities for girls and youth to connect, value themselves, and deepen their peer networks. Whereas girl- and youth-led groups work to build the awareness and knowledge of girls' rights, to foster a caring and safe community, and to build

girls' confidence, communication skills and leadership, leading and working in these groups also has a profound personal impact on the grantees themselves. This is an important form of role-modelling, whereby interventions are developed by young members of the community itself, not as separate from the communities they wish to serve.

Grantees also spoke at length about the personal impact working in a youth-led organisation has had on them, and we highlight some testimonials in Box 3.

### Box 3: Personal impact of engaging in girl- and youth-led work on the grantee:

- *We are all participants of our organisation, with our life stories, which have also been marked by violence, by forced displacement, and we have not been able to have a dignified life, but we show up, we show where we are right now to the people who see us and it is a light of hope ... It's not like we come from other places with comfort, we are from the territory, and we show the community that by working together day-by-day we can achieve transformation. (GYLO M)*
- *By seeing girls that actually made it from primary school to secondary school and then into college, and hearing neighbours say that I inspired them to do this ... That has helped me to maybe see myself as somebody that can be a role model and change somebody's ways of thinking or be able to impact another person. (GYLO L)*
- *Taking the role of a leader has changed a lot of things, especially feeling that life does not revolve around me and whatever it is I do, I have to put other people in mind. I know that whatever decisions I am making definitely affect a lot of people, not just my team members, but also the people that we plan to reach out to, the people that look up to us as translating their voices. (GYLO B)*
- *I have grown, not only as a young leader, but as a human being. I have been able to grow in compassion that we're all just people, we're just people that can grow together. By just believing in girls, you can make a difference, by just telling them that you see them, and that you understand them and that you are listening, they're able to do things in a different light. (GYLO P)*



## Challenges

### Resourcing girl- and youth-led programming

The funding landscape for girls is complex and made up of many different actors and funding mechanisms. Limited disaggregation within some funding organisations makes it difficult to get a clear picture of the amount of money that is going directly to girls and youth (Arutyunova et al., 2023). It is also important to position the investment into adolescent girl- and youth-led work within the broader frame of funding for civil society organisations (CSOs) (see Box 4), which underscores that the vast majority of aid spending does not reach CSOs – and that this is even more problematic in LMIC contexts. By all accounts, investment in girl- and youth-led initiatives remains marginal.

We have outlined some distinctions between the different funders active in resourcing girls in Table 1. In general, many youth-led organisations rely on volunteers and have very limited funding. Large ‘source’ donors (those that do not need to fundraise or rely on other sources and usually have the largest amount of resources) provide

limited funding to youth-led organisations due to strict legal and financial requirements. Intermediaries and smaller organisations, especially those that focus on funding feminist or girl-led movements, generally have the most youth-friendly funding mechanisms, but available funds still remain relatively low. In the context of limited funding availability, youth-led organisations are relying on alternative sources of funding such as crowdfunding or donations, or relying on intermediaries or smaller organisations (Thapa, 2017).

Although still limited in number, there has been a growing focus in recent years from funding programmes and interventions that see girls and youth as beneficiaries, to funding work that is girl- and youth-led. Lewin et al.’s (2023) evidence review of girl-led interventions or projects found that the majority took place within the last five years of the study period (2017–2022). Although donors are starting to make girl- and youth-led work more of a priority, the monetary extent of these investments when compared to overall flows still remains very low and difficult to ascertain, due to limited data exploring funding disaggregation dimensions.

#### Box 4: The broader context of development funding streams

The majority of development aid continues to be channelled through states to finance particular programmes and interventions. These often lead to much larger-scale and longer-term initiatives than are possible for civil society actors to deliver themselves (Gulrajani, 2022). Indeed, government institutions are key actors within an ecosystem of social change when they remove discriminatory laws and implement laws that protect girls, as well as committing to equitable redistribution, and funding for inclusive services and social protection systems that support the rights and well-being of girls across the spectrum of geography, race, disability and class (Abelenda, 2014). Calls for these kinds of structural transformations are integral to feminist civil society organising. However, global calls for governments to commit to progressive gender equity agendas are proving increasingly challenging in a landscape both of resistance and pushback on feminist issues, and the growing role of the private sector in funding initiatives that prioritise economic growth over structural change (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2018; Okech and Musindarwezo, 2019).

Meanwhile, though the OECD recognises the integral role of civil society actors in influencing progressive policy and even providing services that reach people on the front lines of poverty and vulnerability, their most recent figures suggest that around 14% of aid spending goes through CSOs, with the majority being organisations based in donor countries, rather than in ODA-recipient contexts (OECD, 2023). OECD data also shows that only 1% of bilateral aid goes to local CSOs in developing countries (OECD, 2020).

Many of the challenges facing girl-led groups and initiatives, which feminist funding approaches seek to overcome, are akin to those encountered by other grassroots CSOs. These include the maintenance of power inequalities between donors and local actors through requirements that often undermine the very flexibility and responsiveness that can lead to long-term and sustainable social change (OECD, 2020).

**Table 1: Overview of types of funders of girl-led work**

Type of funder	Institutional donors		Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)	Private donors	Girl-focused and feminist funders/collectives
	Bilateral donors	Multilateral donors			
Description	Set up by individual governments, these donors generally have the greatest available funds but often have top-down approaches and strict financial and legal requirements that make it difficult to fund smaller and new organisations. They are source funders; they do not need to fundraise, yet are bound to country-politics.	As intergovernmental agencies, multilateral donors create space for collaboration across diverse stakeholders, often leading partnerships between the United Nations, governments and civil society, though often present strict funding guidelines, and mostly provide large grants to established actors.	NGOs typically receive funds to implement their own projects, but are increasingly experimental in conducting grant-making to smaller actors. Themselves funded by a range of donors, NGOs are able to act more independently than bilateral and multilateral donors, yet the amounts of their grants tend to be smaller.	Independent, set up for specific charitable purposes by individuals, groups or companies. These donors range in terms of their approach to girl- and youth-led funding; while larger corporate donors tend to have more top-down approaches and strict reporting requirements, other smaller funds can be more youth-friendly.	Funders or groups of funders that come together around a shared goal (collectives) that focus primarily on funding girl- and women-focused organisations. They receive funds from larger donors, and are more swiftly able to disburse money to smaller local organisations. These funders are more likely to have girl- and youth-friendly funding mechanisms, to be run by feminist principles, and able to turn their own restricted source funding into unrestricted, transformational funding.
Examples	SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) funds the youth-led United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY). This network includes 130 organisations in 70 countries that work on youth-led peacebuilding and SIDA has committed \$1,671,993 for a 4-year contribution period (2022–2026).	UNESCO's Global Youth Grant Scheme, 20 grants of \$10,000 available for youth organisations and young leaders.	Plan International's Youth Innovation Funds (up to \$5,600 per organisation over 6 months) in West and Central Africa.  Since 2014, Women Deliver has provided 213 small grants of approximately \$5,000 to Women Deliver Young Leaders and Young Leader Alumni, for a total of more than \$1 billion.	The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Stand With A Girl initiative (committed amount \$49,999 over 33 months), which supports youth-led advocacy for gender equality.	The With and for Girls Funds and Global Resilience Funds at Purposeful, providing \$6 million to more than 320 girl-led groups.  FRIDA funds young feminist groups, which can apply for up to \$6,000 for single-year grants that come up for renewal annually or multi-year grants that come up for renewal after two years.  Mama Cash's Resilience Fund grant ranges from €5,000 to €50,000 per year (average grant size is €35,000). Annual grants are made with the intention of renewing them for multiple years.  Amplify Girls' Education & Innovation Fund provided grants averaging \$10,000 to community-driven organisations working on reintegrating adolescent girls in educational pathways following Covid-19.

## How accessible is the funding landscape to girl- and youth-led organisations?

Despite some shifts, there are still many barriers that girl- and youth-led organisations face when trying to access funding. First, many small, local and nascent organisations often do not have sufficient due diligence processes to meet the requirements<sup>6</sup> of larger international and institutional donors, and these organisations instead rely on indirectly supporting local smaller organisations through intermediary donors or through smaller dedicated funds (Devonald et al., 2023c). Organisational registration (gaining legal or formal status) presents another barrier and is often a donor prerequisite. Although some girl-led groups are able to (and choose to) formally register, others are unable or unwilling to do so due to cost barriers, legal age requirements, or because they do not want to take on the legal responsibility or make their work very visible. The process of registration and the costs involved vary significantly by country but often require clear financial systems, hired staff and a permanent address, which many girl- and youth-led organisations do not have (Mama Cash and FRIDA, 2018).

*What kind of processes are needed for our registration? What are the timelines? What are the major things that need to be submitted and to whom? The government registrar of companies? The national NGO secretariat? Do we need annual returns? These things are difficult and sometimes costly. It would be great to get mentoring and professional advice on administrative aspects, and someone to just review our submissions and proposals.* (GYLO F)

It can also be difficult for girls to navigate funding opportunities. There is a lack of donor transparency, which makes it difficult to understand how organisations can access certain funds and what funds are actually available, and if there are thematic, geographic or other parameters to access (Salley, 2019; Arutyunova et al., 2023). Plan International's Equality Accelerator is one initiative aimed at supporting girls and youth to navigate the funding ecosystem by providing a dedicated funding database, key resources and crowdsourcing opportunities.

*Young organisations have the potential to do something new and to do something big as well. The main thing is that we are expected to have a level of expertise that even very adult organisations do not always have. It is difficult to know how to match donors' expectations.* (GYLO K)

When girl-led organisations or smaller local organisations gain funding, it is often earmarked for specific projects. It is difficult to gain flexible and core funds to enable organisations to spend resources as they see fit, including for organisational growth costs (Salley, 2019; Ali Diini, 2024). Donors do not always take into consideration girls' agency and the uniqueness of their age, and girl- and youth-led groups can feel that they have to present themselves in certain 'adult-like' ways for funders to take them seriously (Arutyunova et al., 2023). There are also limited efforts to select youth groups with an intersectional lens by prioritising under-resourced and particularly marginalised youth (FRIDA and AWID, 2016). Box 5 looks at our primary data from girl-focused and feminist intermediary funders/collectives to explore the range of work they fund, their modalities, and what they identify as challenges for girl- and youth-led work.

## Impact measurement gaps as linked to organisational capacity

Although growing interest in resourcing girls and youth presents an opportunity to better include girls and youth in impact measurement, the reality is that traditional measures of performance<sup>7</sup> remain mainstream for donors and do not always align with the capacities of girl- and youth-led organisations, or with their work. One intermediary donor mentioned, 'We've been using a lens that doesn't make sense to understand their work'. Although there is the donor tendency to presume that short-term measurable impact increases accountability, more recent literature underscores that projects, movements, programmes and advocacy intended to influence gender equality and social norms are highly complex (Dalton et al., 2023) and deserve a much more expansive understanding of impact.

<sup>6</sup> Including appropriate governance structures, risk management procedures, and minimum financial thresholds and procedures.

<sup>7</sup> The way in which institutional funders ensure that investment is well-spent is through monitoring and evaluating impact. What results were obtained with those funds? How many people were reached within the grant cycle? How were the funds allocated and how did this lead to the project objectives being met? Is the impact sustainable over time? Answering questions such as these is seen by many donors and monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) experts as one robust way to mitigate risk and achieve results (Lever et al., 2020).

One of the MEAL experts we spoke to commented that:

*There are challenges in finding evidence of impact in a way that traditional donors like and it's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The hesitation of some large donors to invest in this work is that we don't have evidence of impacts on the outcomes that they're interested in.* (MEAL expert C)

All girls and youth involved in our study commented that measuring the impact of their work is something they grapple with. They sit somewhere between fulfilling donor requirements on impact reporting, capturing feedback on their work from the community, and internally reflecting on the need to improve their own monitoring systems and their own understanding of how to capture the change they are working towards. It is also true that girl- and youth-led organisations place a varying degree of emphasis on impact measurement, with comments ranging from 'we have nothing in place to help us in monitoring' (GYLO H) to 'we collect how many girls participate in our activities, what age groups, and in what context – basically the descriptive

information that donors ask about' (GYLO I), to 'in terms of monitoring and evaluation, we have a theory of change, we have a strategic plan in place, we regularly utilise outcome harvesting, we conduct pre- and post-tests, we have dedicated monitoring and evaluation staff, and we engage in midterm reviews with stakeholders assessing our work' (GYLO K). In Box 6, we synthesise data from girl-focused and feminist intermediary donors who are attempting to bridge their impact measures and reporting with girl- and youth-led capacities.

## Measurement gaps as linked to difficulty in measuring social norm change

Cutting across the range of thematic areas tackled and the modalities adopted, girl- and youth-led groups seek to transform discriminatory social norms and shift community attitudes and behaviours on girlhood and youthhood, which preclude them from realising their full set of individual and collective capabilities. The impact of social norms on unequal gender outcomes is well documented, as is

### Box 5: Girl-focused and feminist intermediary funders/collectives: who and what do they invest in?

Girl-focused and feminist intermediary donors directly funding girl- and youth-led groups do not identify as donors, or as funders. Their mandates and visions are broader in scope, often trying to work with girls through providing money but also mentorship, accompaniment, and spaces for connection and learning. Intermediaries that have girls and youth either as their main grantees or within the portfolio of their grantees see their mandates as lasting beyond a funding cycle and further than the end of a grantee's intervention. Many girl- and youth-led groups they work with are nascent, often unregistered, and eager to receive their first funding, after periods of time having worked for free and with minimal structure, while often balancing school and university.

These intermediaries self-identify as 'movement building hubs for adolescent girls' (Intermediary D) or 'actors in an ecosystem that do more than grant-making' (Intermediary H). They see their role partly as political. They spoke of their political responsibility to ensure that girls and youth have access to money and to spaces to connect with other groups and other donors, are able to implement their creativity and vision, be part of youth delegations in global advocacy spaces, and bring their experiences to light.

*Money is often the entry point through which we engage with the group, but we recognise that because of the particular conditions of girls' marginalisation, funding alone isn't enough. Girls are deeply isolated from each other, so we came to learn that one of our responsibilities was helping them to connect with each other, and that's why we're really particular about naming ourselves as a movement hub rather than just a funder.* (Intermediary D)

Although a small portion of intermediary funding hubs we spoke to fund specific thematic areas (prevention of child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), or sexual and reproductive health and rights), the majority are purposely 'issue agnostic'. They are intentional about not being prescriptive with their funding, allowing the girl- and youth-led groups the freedom and expertise to decide which area(s) they want to focus on. How the flexibility to adapt impacts organisational growth remains a question that this study has raised. Whether girl- and youth-led groups need to maintain lean structures with minimal staff to remain nimble, and whether precarity is tied to flexibility, are points that are worthy of deeper exploration.



### Core, flexible funding with accompaniment

All girl-focused and feminist intermediary funders/collectives in our study provide long-term core and flexible funding to their grantees – over periods ranging from 1 year to 5 years to 10 years – as opposed to restricted or earmarked funding tied to a specific project or thematic area, which is how other donors funding work with girls and youth have tended to operate. Conversely, unrestricted flexible funding is money that flows directly into the grantee's budget without it being tied to specific objectives. The recipient of flexible funding can thus use the funds to reach its mission and vision, including disbursing funds for programming, responding and/or pivoting to unanticipated opportunities or crises, and covering operational costs (including staff salaries, office rent, utilities, hardware and software, and hiring consultants to assist with developing strategic plans). Flexible funding concedes decision-making power to grantees, who are trusted to develop activities, implement projects, and reach girls and youth in ways that are appropriate to their mission and context. There is also an appreciation that girls and youth are often newly organising, and need the space to learn and grow, experiment, fail, and try again.

When grantees receive core funds they are required to report back to funding hubs, yet the reporting format, intervals and content are different to what is requested in project-based restricted funding. Grantees are able to report on their full range of activities, rather than focus on project results, and typically work together with the funder on ways to mitigate the challenges faced. With regards to reporting, the funding intermediaries we spoke to varied in terms of reporting templates and structures, yet all believed that investment accountability lies with the grantee and their community, and reporting is a way to ensure that the funder is meeting the grantee's needs. This being said, reporting remains a sticky issue where funding hubs often have to report their own activities to larger donors, causing an accountability chain that is difficult to disrupt. As one interviewee from a funding hub explained:

*We work as alchemists, so we take money that is extremely restricted and make it available to groups that usually don't have access to that kind of money. On accountability, we really want to take on most of the burden of administrative and auditing requests from bilaterals rather than asking our grantee partners to do that. Some bilaterals are ok with that but others not as much – they like the idea of funding girls and women in a bit more of a wild way, but they're not ready to give up their power and their control over money, and to trust the people that are experiencing what you want to fund against. (Intermediary F)*

These intermediary donors noted that core, flexible, multi-year funding is mostly used by grantees for programming at the community level rather than upskilling, institutionalising, or engaging in organisational growth. For this reason, they also procure a process of accompaniment, whereby the funding hub is able to assist their grantees with capacity-building and other forms of support. Admittedly, tailored accompaniment is a challenge for hubs. With some investing in more than 650 organisations worldwide, understanding the discrete organisational needs of each grantee is a difficult endeavour. To mitigate this challenge, hubs offer accompaniment money (i.e. further funds provided for organisational growth) or rely on a web of regional focal points, dedicated to understanding the needs of groups of grantees in a specific region and offering more localised support.

Intermediaries commented that although when speaking to one another and promoting their grant-making calls it appears that there is a mature funding field for girls and youth, this is simply not the case. Resourcing girls and youth remains a niche field, and organisations that are willing to trust girls and youth to use core and flexible funds is an even smaller field.

the impact of community-led work (whether standalone or as part of joint initiatives with larger developmental organisations) in initiating effective and sustainable social norm change (Boudet et al., 2023; Cookson et al., 2023). Less clear from our data are the ways in which girl- and youth-led organisations are partaking in this change.

While girls and youth spoke about their in-depth knowledge of community hierarchies and their ability to mobilise communities through positive dialogue that

focuses on the needs and rights of girls and youth, the complexities of exactly how they challenge community hierarchies and how they break structural barriers deserves deeper inquiry. While one group discussed their work as instigating normative changes at the national level and another group was able to transform the views of teachers on delivering comprehensive sexuality education, the extent to which these impacts are sustained over time will also be important to trace.

## Box 6: Impact reporting

With regards to impact monitoring, intermediaries commented that the lack of collective taxonomies on girl- and youth-led impact, and lack of harmonised reporting, were posing delays in collectively advancing related monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) practices. That said, intermediaries try to place emphasis on what is relevant to the grantees' work and instil a reporting culture where grantees can feel experts of their work. When reflecting on what this translates into in practice, it means documenting changes in awareness and agency, changes around social norm shifts – rather than conclusive social norm change – and understanding whether and how power shifts are being initiated.

*We are really trying to understand power and how that power showed up in girls' lives before the intervention, during and after, through questions that look at the particular conditions of her marginalisation. And that's often around violence and distance from assets. It's a super imperfect science and we're always grappling with how much we're asking girls to sort of conform to this formal M&E [monitoring and evaluation] system that's been laid out for them. (Intermediary D)*

With regards to the form of reporting, interviewees from intermediary funding hubs commented on trying to take the burden away from their grantees, reduce reporting workloads, and to flip the onus onto donors to conduct data trend analysis, and lengthy report drafting. Taking on board feedback from grantees, donors are implementing and piloting light-touch approaches to reporting, including free-flowing phone call check-ins every six months, WhatsApp and Signal voice notes, and site visits led by intermediary regional focal points with individual partners and joint group visits. Through site visits and phone calls, intermediaries often – though not exclusively – conduct reporting in verbal form, where grantees are offered the opportunity to reflect on how they are experiencing change in their lives. Verbal dialogue is thought to help intermediaries step beyond the philanthropic habit of being extractivist (trying to extract donor-driven information from the grantee) and piloting ways to meaningfully learn about what is happening in the lifetime of a grant. Although grantees are sometimes asked to co-create the parameters and measurement of their impact, this remains difficult to implement at scale. The reason why verbal communication is preferred to more formalised written reporting is not only to relieve workload burdens, but also because there is a profound respect that girls are free to express themselves openly and organically, organising their learning and their challenges in expression and in languages that make sense to them – rather than in adult-like ways.

Although verbal reporting is common, some intermediaries did mention requesting written feedback at other points of the grant cycle, including indicator data (number of participants in a capacity-building session, or the number of participants in an economic empowerment scheme), and stories of change. Most are not interested in individual activity goals but rather a narrative about the extent of change they are seeing, or whether they are making steps towards reaching their intended objectives. Stories of change are also a helpful tool to assess the organisation's adaptability to newly emerging challenges that the community, girls and youth face. A number of interviewees from intermediary hubs mentioned inputting grantees' stories into variations of the Change Matrix, which assists in capturing key outcome areas that are able to help the intermediaries and grantees continue to do relevant work and stay on track to change the problems they themselves define in their community.

Assumptions around the MEAL capacity of girl- and youth-led organisations, however, lead to constraints and contradictions emerging from intermediaries. A thorny concept that is surfacing is whether intermediaries need to assist in equipping their grantees with the skills, resources and bureaucracy they need to navigate current impact and funding ecosystems, or whether they should be collectively breaking the current system to unearth an entirely new way of thinking and acting in partnership with adolescent girls and youth. Views differed:

*There are grantees who do want to formalise, who do want to be able to access additional funding, and because other funders are not yet on the same transformational page, we do see it in our mandates to support grantees to get that additional funding by building their capacity. (Intermediary F)*

*By 'upskilling' we're just creating a culture of tiny NGOs, where we're asking for things and partnering in ways that are not transformative. Even the girls who are most marginalised from these formal systems have learnt what it is that they think we want to hear in the language we want to hear it. So what we end up seeing is the toolkit-isation*

*and the NGO-isation of girl-led groups. What do we want here? Do we want to fund compliant activists or do we want to resource movements? And they're very different things to each other. (Intermediary D)*

These emerging tensions, and their connection to the desire for a more defined and harmonised conceptualisation of impact for girl- and youth-led organisations, as well as their link to the magnitude of individual grants, and other considerations, demonstrate the complexities within this discourse.

## Reconciling measures of empowerment and other gender-equitable outcomes

The emphasis of funding for girl- and youth-led organisations is on empowerment through mentorship and learning for girls and young people in order to build their own movements and set their own priorities for action. Accounts from donors, girls and intermediaries suggest that this approach leans on the premise that the empowering effects of girls' activities will extend to others in their community and society through role-model effects, changing perceptions, and eventually shifts in social norms.

While evidencing the actual effects of girl-led initiatives on broader social change was beyond the scope of this research, the broader literature on the relationship between empowerment and gender-equitable outcomes underlines the importance of connecting individual and collective transformation, especially in maximising impacts for the most marginalised women and girls (Mikel Brown, 2016; Loveday et al., 2023).

## Acknowledging girl and youth transitions in the donor-grantee relationship

The girls and youth we spoke with discussed the multiple ways in which donors can support them with impact monitoring, often citing capacity-building opportunities, networking and connecting opportunities, and social entrepreneurship mentoring as equally or even more important to their work than financial contributions. Interviewees typically viewed the donor-grantee relationship as a conduit to organisational maturity, strategic growth, learning and impact agendas, and possibly securing more access and readiness for future funding.

One of the MEAL experts believed that while a transformative donor-grantee relationship may be the overarching goal, it is important that girl- and youth-led groups are equipped with the resources they need to keep afloat and keep implementing their work. As a transformational donor-grantee relationship gets better defined, including what type of impact should be

requested, donors should strive to move money with feminist underpinnings:

*The truth is that it is incumbent upon donors to help young organisations build their capacity, to get funding from other donors. Which may not mean building a logframe and all those systems, but at least understanding that impact will need to be measured, even for trust-based philanthropies. We should advocate for flexible reporting, and moving towards a mainstream understanding that numbers don't tell us much about social change, but still, girls and youth do need to be capacitated to create a theory of change that helps donors understand what you're trying to do and how you're going to get there and then how you will know you're successful or you're on the right path. Just understanding how to make that articulation would be tremendously valuable. (MEAL expert G)*

It is important to acknowledge here that the specific life stage that girl and youth grantees are going through should be embedded in the donor-grantee relationship. The singularity and difficulty of resourcing girl- and youth-led groups is that resourcing ought to align with the cognitive, social, emotional and developmental transitions that young grantees are going through by incorporating a transition process for grantees that chose to move on from their work. Incorporating these transitions into the donor-grantee relationship means understanding that due to the uniqueness of their life stage, not all grantees will remain advocates for their entire lives, or necessarily dedicate their career progression to working on social transformation. Although aligning funding principles with the adolescent and youth life stage is valuable, it is equally critical to better understand how these transitions overlap with risks of short-term investment, calls for long-term funding and related cost implications for funding grantees that chose to transition out of this work. While there is a need for further research to understand these dynamics, they are increasingly recognised in girl-focused intermediary grant-making.

# Conclusions

Political attention to the possibilities presented by girl- and youth-led organising and activism for global development and gender equity has fostered a growing interest among donors and funders in how best to finance and support girl- and youth-led organisations. However, the evidence base on girl- and youth-led groups is nascent and pays limited attention to the unique position and capacities of girl- and youth-led organisations in relation to processes of social change and gender justice. A more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics is needed to underpin more effective and inclusive approaches to resourcing girl-led groups and to movement-building across the social change ecosystem. By synthesising the experiences of these organisations, this report has elucidated some of the key opportunities, contributions and challenges that currently exist within this space, with a view to shifting the conversation towards how we can better foster an inclusive, progressive and collective social change ecosystem.

The experiences of girl-led organisations, intermediaries and donors presented in this report offer nuance to two prominent critiques of the global recognition and celebration of girls' activism. The first critique relates to the homogenisation of the category of 'Third World girls' and collapsing of other axes of social difference such as disability, class and race (Erevelles and Nguyen, 2016; Vanner, 2019). Despite the feminist funding principles on which current resourcing models are premised having been developed to explicitly address these challenges, processes for funding appear still difficult to reconcile with an intersectional approach in practice. At the crux of this is the reality that privilege itself shapes the opportunity to work for free, as many girl-led organisations do, at least at the start of their journey. Concerted attention to the structural barriers – related to poverty, access to education, language, and geographical locality, among others – that exclude certain girls is not only a matter of



Gender club coordinator, 34-years-old, Afar © Nathalie Bertrams/ GAGE 2024



inclusive activism but is central to ensuring that power dynamics are not just replicated across girl-led spaces. It can also help donors think about sustainability beyond just the skills that resourced girls can take forward, and about mechanisms to support lasting social transformation that advantage all girls, as per the long-term aims of resourcing girl-led movements.

Second, and related to this latter point, existing work on girls' movements also critiques the conceptual detachment of 'girls' empowerment' from broader gender equity goals and structural inequalities (Harris, 2004; Mikel Brown, 2016; Taft, 2020). Yet while celebrating girls' achievements – often on a shoestring – is undoubtedly important, many intermediaries and donors equally recognise that girls' activities must be underpinned by movements for wider social change that demand structural transformation. Indeed, although girls' organisations may be able (for instance) to assist other girls with improved knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and rights, for girls to be able to transform this knowledge into actions such as accessing and using services and resources to support sexual well-being, such services must be properly and sustainably funded and delivered at scale. These changes will require concerted investments, connections with other change agents, intergenerational solidarity and longer timescales – all elements that are beyond the scope and purpose of funding for girl-led organisations only. It is through locating girl-led initiatives within a broader ecosystem for social change that connections can be made across the capacities and roles of different civil society actors (Vanner, 2019; Raby and Sheppard, 2021). An approach that considers girls as part of a social change ecosystem can also foster the kinds of intergenerational dialogue and partnerships that evidence shows are essential for effective norms change (Edell et al., 2016; Marcus et al., 2017; Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2022).

Indeed, the activities described by girl-led groups centre almost universally on social norms change through various means, including capacity-building, sex education, outreach, advocacy, and role modelling through embodying

a different path that challenges expectations of what girls should and can do in a given setting. However, there is currently inadequate attention paid to the transitional nature of girlhood, and thus the temporary positions that individual girls occupy as role models. This means that their age, and thus their relationship with and to others in the community, will inevitably shift as they 'age out' of adolescent and youth categories. This may also both foreclose and open opportunities for effecting change in ways that are not yet properly understood in research in this field. Given the emphasis of donors and intermediaries on funding that supports relationships that last over time and can have sustained impact, the implications of these shifts for social change entry points are important to consider in the context of funding for girls.

Because of donor and intermediary emphasis on movement-building and capacity-building for organisations to lead their own work, it is often impossible to disentangle project outcomes from outcomes on or for girls involved, as they are impacted by resourcing both as individuals and as part of girl-led movements. The mentorship, accompaniment, and spaces for connection and learning offered by donors to girl- and youth-led groups clearly has significant personal impacts for girls, and this is valued by all those within the relationship. However, this is not formally recognised in impact measurements, which undermines its value and importance as part of the process of resourcing girl- and youth-led groups. None of the girl- and youth-led groups who took part in this study mentioned that personal impact aspects were being explicitly examined or captured in donor reporting – notwithstanding the impact that role-modelling can have on social norm change, especially when supported through broader mentorship, networking and skills training initiatives (Harper et al., 2020).

# Implications for programming, resourcing and the evidence base

Our findings suggest that in order to provide further support to girl- and youth-led organisations and to foster their potential to contribute to the broader ecosystem of social change for girls and their communities, the following actions should be considered by practitioners, funders and researchers:

## 1. Harmonise impact measurement across groups involved in this work

so that donors can better understand the range of impact that girls and youth can work towards, and the differing taxonomies and measures needed:

- a. Engage girls and youth as active contributors to M&E, rather than framed as accountability agents on behalf of their donors. For example, girls and youth specifically requested that donors get more creative about requesting measurements and

stories on adaptability to the changing landscape and changing contextual realities. Not only are girls and youth able to adapt rapidly to their changing environments and typically nimble enough to pivot their programmes, but the grantees themselves are going through transitions in a unique life stage – and impact measurements need to factor in these realities.

- b. Involve girls as agents in the process of measuring impact in order to better tailor and prioritise resources to local community realities. While impact measurement for these initiatives needs to reflect organisational capacities and typologies of interventions, the capacities and unique position of girls in relation to the context in which they are working must also be recognised, valued and incorporated.



A 19-year-old who is deaf works in Rangamati Handicap School, where she started as a volunteer assistant, Rangamati, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/ GAGE 2024

- c. Include participation in the wider social change ecosystem as a measure of impact, reflecting the need for action at different scales in order to improve girls' well-being.
- d. Improve the understanding of the timeframes of social norm change (including beyond the duration of a grant cycle) and how these intersect with the ages and transitions of girl- and youth-led groups. Linked to this, advance impact measurements that are able to monitor the impacts of core and flexible funding that is long term.

## 2. Pilot different resourcing models and investigate their respective impacts:

- a. Explore support structures, intergenerational solidarity, and intermediary linkages to wider thematic efforts.
- b. Engage with the social change ecosystem and broader spectrum of types of organisations to generate a better understanding of potential synergies with girls and youth, and possibilities for collective work that is in turn likely to generate greater interest from donors.

## 3. Invest in strengthening the evidence base on girl- and youth-led organisations and their impact in a strategic and longer-term way:

- a. Explore the characteristics of these groups in greater depth in order to better understand who is involved and represented within girl- and youth-led organisations and who is not (age, class, education advantage, urban advantage, etc.), and which issues are currently prioritised and which are not.
- b. Explore the nature of girl- and youth-led groups and how they evolve over time. This requires a longitudinal approach that can capture the dynamic and quickly changing nature of these groups.
- c. Work towards a better disaggregation of existing funding flows among bilateral, multilateral and philanthropic donors going to girl- and youth-led organisations.
- d. Explore the role of different organisational types within the social change ecosystem in relation to the objectives of girl- and youth-led organisations.



A 24-year-old, Jordanian leading a group discussion © Marcel Saleh/ GAGE 2024



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## **About GAGE**

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a decade-long (2016-2026) longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit [www.gage.odi.org.uk](http://www.gage.odi.org.uk) for more information.

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Front cover: A 21-year-old girl who completed grade 12 and wants a government job © Nathalie Bertrams/ GAGE 2024

