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# Building Girls' Power

**Perspectives  
on theory  
and practice  
in working with  
adolescent girls**



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# Introduction

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

As part of a broader strategy to strengthen an ecosystem of girls' rights funding, advocates for a transformational feminist approach to girls' work met in Nairobi in 2019 and began discussing practical ways to bring a power-building lens to children's rights programming and funding. What began as an effort to capture the lessons of that work grew into a more comprehensive look at girls and power, leveraging new learning from other regions and informed by interviews with leading experts, advocates and girls themselves. This work is in process, and in many ways, has been transformed by the moment we find ourselves in globally. As feminists, we believe deeply in documenting and sharing learning as a part of our practice. Though much of the work that gave birth to this series is still in the early stages, we hope that these initial thoughts on theory and real-life lessons on practice will offer some contribution to those interested in deepening and expanding their work with girls.

The particular bodies of work in East and West Africa, referenced through the paper, have evolved through many years of conversation and critical practice between co-conspirators, including Ramatu Bangura, Jody Myrum, Rosa Bransky, Chernor Bah, Zanele Sibanda, Fassil Marriam, Salma Babu, Purity Kagwiria and Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli. We are particularly grateful to Boikanyo Modungwa, Ramatu Bangura, Judy Diers, Chernor Bah, and Purity Kagwiria for their review, feedback and guidance through the writing process, and to Matthew DeGallan and Erin Barnes for copy editing.

The three papers in this series were co-authored by Rosa Bransky – Co-Founder and Co-CEO of Purposeful, Jody Myrum – Gender Justice Consultant and Former NoVo Foundation Director, Zanele Sibanda – Director, Fenomenal Funds, and Fassil Marriam, Executive Director of the Children's Rights and Violence Prevention Fund.

Since time immemorial, girls have been organising and agitating in their communities, pushing back against the everyday oppressions that are so often synonymous with girlhood. In their individual relationships, their families, homes, communities and countries, their resistance has always sparked and sustained transformational change. If as, in the phrase coined by Foucault; where there is power, there is resistance, so too, our work shows us that wherever there is resistance, there are girls.

But because there is no coherent field or theorem that centers girls' power, girls find themselves at the mercy of overlapping and often competing perspectives and approaches – including child protection, violence against children, youth work, women's rights, violence against women, humanitarian aid, and development. Each of these spaces has a set of distinct, though overlapping, financing models, practices and organising principles. They are often underpinned by formalised international instruments or broad-based social theories that are well articulated and documented.



## AT BEST, GIRLS ARE BEING SUPPORTED THROUGH FORMAL INSTITUTIONS USING TOOLS THAT WERE NEVER REALLY DESIGNED FOR GIRLS OR WITH GIRLS

At worst, they are falling through the cracks entirely. Girls experience these cracks in obvious, day-to-day inequalities, like a lack of basic community services designed specifically for them. Less visible, and thus harder to combat and transform, are the forces that allocate resources at the national and international level without considering girls' unique needs and perspectives.

In short, there is a glaring need for a theory of practice for work that is uniquely of, for, and by adolescent girls – a theory of practice that offers a coherent approach to the work, starting with, indeed centering on girls in all their messiness and lived reality, and yet which is also conceivable in consort with the formalised sectors through which the money still ultimately flows. To do this, we must first begin by critically analysing the stories we tell ourselves about girls, asking where and how these stories are obscuring the realities of life at the unique moment of adolescence.

Mainstream development and social change work has fallen into narrative traps that too often look at girls as vulnerable children who need protection or, conversely, as superstar potential leaders who can pull themselves and their communities out of poverty if given the right doses of information and empowerment.

Indeed, there are myths about girls and girlhood scattered across our field that drive funding models and decisions, and which have become literal barriers in the way of girls. Dominant narratives erase who and what is responsible for creating systematic harm, taking us away from approaches that might actually address the oppressive systems at the root of girls' marginalisation.

*Dominant narratives erase who and what is responsible for creating systematic harm, taking us away from approaches that might actually address the oppressive systems at the root of girls' marginalisation*

None of these stories about girls' work centre a full and expansive understanding of girls' social, sexual, and economic lives. None are able to fully grasp the paradoxical reality of the deep power all girls hold in the context of compounding systems and structures of oppression.

For way too long we have, all of us, been stuck in an endless loop of debate about the level of agency we can ascribe as resting with individual girls, as if there were a neat correlation between increasing age and levels of agency, and thus, a simple age-based equation to assess a person's need for protection or ability for action.

It is clear to anyone working with girls, that even at relatively young ages, they are making complex decisions for themselves. Every day, girls are succeeding in making the best of their circumstances by deploying a range of sophisticated strategies, connecting with their peers and with social change processes on a micro and macro scale, in ways unique to the particular life stage of adolescence. It is equally clear that girls are choosing among a restrictive and often dehumanising palette of options, with limited access to assets, information, services, or networks of social solidarity. Rather than a tension to resolve, these are a set of truths that we must learn to hold – of girls' right to be held, to heal, to play and to lead. That is what it means, by very definition, to be a girl – to live at the apex of power and vulnerability.

However we conceptualise agency in our discussions, our primary aim should be to contribute towards transformation in girls' lives, and in order to understand how to do that, we need our analysis to move beyond the question of complicity or force of actor or acted upon, and into the precise nature of the cultural and social structures which constrain (or have the capacity to contribute towards the liberation of) girls. Right now, we adults and so-called allies of girls, have got the question wrong. Instead of asking, in our own ways and own phrases, over and over, whether girls are indeed powerful, we should instead be asking how do we build power with girls?

*Rather than a tension to resolve, these are a set of truths that we must learn to hold – of girls' right to be held, to heal, to play and to lead. That is what it means, by very definition, to be a girl – to live at the apex of power and vulnerability.*



## **ULTIMATELY, BUILDING GIRLS' POWER IS THE ONLY ROUTE TO CREATING REAL, EMBEDDED, LONG-TERM TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE**

But for too long we have pushed discussions of power to the margins of girls' work, falling back instead on the sanitised 'empowerment' agenda which has itself become its own kind of paradigm – depoliticised and individualised to such a degree that the power has all but been erased. Building girls' power is political work, it is feminist work, it is justice work. But nor should power ever be the antithesis of child protection or child rights work because power is itself the greatest protective force against systems of domination. Power is protective. Building girls' power needs to be the work of all of us, whatever sector and theoretical frameworks we begin from.

This publication offers three perspectives on how to centre girls' power, to resource power-building processes, and our own journey towards a more politicised way of understanding girls' work – through illustrative case studies, social theory, and practice-based tools for all those interested in doing this work better too. The lessons we share come from decades of work by the authors and their organisations working at both the community level with girls and at the global level with funders and policymakers.

But this is not a toolkit nor a roadmap to a power building programme. This work is inherently complex, expansive, and contextually specific. It is by its very nature, only power building work if it is activated and catalysed by girls themselves – if it builds girls' power through its very form, function, and design. There is no shortcut here. There is no innovation lab that will save us. There are only girls, and what they tell us they need, and the resources and intellectual capacities we can mobilise as adults and allies. Together, we might just lay the seeds of a world where all girls everywhere can live into the fullness of their power, and as they do, watch in awe as the world as we know it, transforms.



**'Building Girls' Power' is part of a multi-year project to document and amplify the theories and practices of political girls' work.**



## **PART ONE LOOKS AT SOME OF THE THEORETICAL TENSIONS IN GIRLS' WORK**

offering perspectives and entry points on how we can move beyond these tensions to adapt our practice with girls. We draw on case studies from one of Purposeful's projects in West Africa to offer initial thoughts on what a politics of practice could look like in work with girls.



## **PART TWO LOOKS AT THE WAYS IN WHICH GIRLS' WORK IS CURRENTLY FUNDED**

and how philanthropy, in particular, can adapt how – and who – it funds to achieve transformative results for girls, and to deliver more powerful outcomes in the broader issues they care about, from health and education to violence prevention and racial justice.



## **PART THREE OFFERS AN IN-DEPTH CASE STUDY OF A GIRLS' POWER-BUILDING PROJECT IN EAST AFRICA**

An initiative of the Child Rights Violence Prevention Fund, this project brought together 33 community-based organisations from Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda to listen and learn with girls, form organisational clusters to develop joint initiatives, and co- create programmes that centre the political processes of power-building in a diverse range of communities. We also share a range of practical tools developed over the course of the initiative, including worksheets, workshop activities and girl-centred research methods to help other organisations explore their own power-building approaches.

# Part One:

## Power as protective



Lessons from Sierra Leone on building power with girls

### INTRODUCTION

Despite the deep vulnerabilities adolescent girls face and the deep opportunities created by meaningfully supporting them, they are often invisible in strategies and programmes focused on both children and women. Because adolescent girls straddle childhood and adulthood, and are often invisible across movements, they are largely left out of any gender justice, rights, development, protection, or other sector approaches.

At its core, girls' work is fraught with tensions bound up with binary understandings of gender, age and agency. In this context, various sectoral approaches have emerged that attempt to resolve these tensions with tightly defined ideological perspectives – perspectives that coalesce around the binaries of girls as rights-subjects or objects of protection. None of these approaches allows for a full and expansive understanding of girls' social, sexual, and economic lives. As a painful result, funders and practitioners are missing out on a profound opportunity to support girls to build lives of safety, meaning and dignity, and to secure the broader social and economic transformations that happen when girls and women are able to claim their power.

Taking this higher order goal as our starting point, this paper draws on social theory and case studies from a feminist power-building initiative in Sierra Leone to offer practice-based examples of what it might mean to build power with girls.



Throughout this first section, we will use a case study from Purposeful to ground theory and practice from their work in Sierra Leone. Purposeful is a movement-building hub for adolescent girls, rooted in Africa and working all around the world. Purposeful believes that another world is not only possible, it is already being built right here and now, in the ways that girls are imagining with each other, modelling with each other, pushing us all a little further towards liberation. Centering the political power of girls and their allies across the world, Purposeful enters all of its work through a power-building lens – redistributing power assets, building collective power, organising power-holders, and transforming power structures.

*The case study is brought to life in a series of conversations with Purposeful Co-CEOs Chernor Bah and Rosa Bransky.*

## FOR MOST GIRLS, SIMPLY BEING YOUNG AND FEMALE PLACES THEM AT THE VERY BOTTOM OF THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY



Around the world, 129 million girls are out of school. In countries affected by conflict, girls are more than twice as likely to be out of school than girls living in non-affected countries<sup>3</sup>.

An estimated 12 million were married as children in 2020, and there are 650 million women alive today who were married before the age of 18.



More than 200 million girls and women live with the consequences of female genital mutilation, and at least 4 million girls are at risk of undergoing the practice each year.

Every year, an estimated 21 million girls aged 15–19 years old in developing regions become pregnant and approximately 12 million of them give birth<sup>4</sup>

While the specifics might vary by geography, the overall picture is the same – individual potential is unrealised while systemic cycles of inequality persist. At the root of all of this are the intersecting forces of domination and exploitation rooted in patriarchy – the global system of white male supremacy that keeps power situated in the hands of men by aiming to control the minds and bodies of women and girls. Sometimes this control is exercised in obvious ways – the reality or fear of sexual violence, or the all-consuming impact of anti-Black, racist structural institutions. Sometimes it is more subtle, woven into the fabric of social, cultural and economic life – diffused, obscured, but all-pervasive.

Entrenched systems of patriarchy, exploitation and domination mean that all girls and women are deeply vulnerable to violence and discrimination. Race, class, ethnic group, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, marriage status, ability, age and other factors work together to deepen exclusion and harm even further. Given the compounding effects of multiple forms of structural inequality they face, it is no surprise that girls are the most invisible and silenced across all communities.

And this silence and marginalisation is the most pronounced for girls during their adolescent years. Until puberty, girls and boys in many parts of the world experience parity in opportunities for education, health, and personal development.

*Because there is no coherent adolescent girls field or theorem, girls find themselves at the mercy of overlapping and often competing perspectives and approaches*



### CASE STUDY: FRAMING THE CONTEXT

In Sierra Leone, as with much of the world, girls' lives are marked by a range of intersecting forces of domination and exploitation. We could share statistics all day about the gendered nature of poverty and the very real ways in which it plays out in the lives and minds and bodies of adolescent girls. As a few examples, 30% of all girls under 18 years-old in the country are pregnant or have a child, and 70% of those girls will be single mothers at some point in their lifetimes. Social and structural forces of domination and exploitation make motherhood particularly impoverishing for young women and girls. Only 1 in 10 girls who start school finish secondary school, 9 in 10 experience FGM/C, and 4 in 10 marry before their 18th birthday.

Purposeful was founded at the height of the Ebola crisis to respond to some of this reality, but importantly, we were born out of a call from a growing movement of activists – community based organisations and allies across spaces who were coming together to reimagine what it might look like to support girls. Rather than start from a place of pathologising girls, we were founded on a deep belief, born from lived experience and knowledge, that girls and their older feminist allies were already modelling solutions every day. Perhaps, most importantly, these solutions were largely hidden from view because they didn't quite fit within any of the usual frameworks of programmers and donors.

At around 12 years-old, the paths for girls and boys frequently begin to diverge, with opportunities for boys continuing to expand, while those for girls often contract<sup>5</sup>. At the onset of puberty, adolescent girls often experience increased gender discrimination that are at once both subtle – woven into the fabric of social life – and more dramatic, creating profound chasms and disjuncts between life as 'girl' and life as 'adolescent'. These changes can result in withdrawal from school, increased work burden, loss of peer support, increase in social isolation, pressure for early and forced marriage often as an economic survival strategy, and increased sexual violence.

Although the multiple forms of oppression that adolescent girls face should rightly see them front and centre of donor priorities and policy agendas, they are most likely to be shut out or forgotten. Because girls are navigating life at the intersections of multiple identities – not quite children, not quite women – they all too often find themselves at the whims of overlapping and sometimes competing sectoral perspectives and priorities, including child protection, violence against children, youth work, women's rights, violence against women, humanitarian and development.

Each of these spaces has a set of distinct, though overlapping, financing models, theories, practices and organising principles. They are often underpinned by formalised international instruments or broad-based social theories that are well articulated and documented.

In contrast, there is no unifying approach to girls' work. No central thesis exists to help us understand the unique intersections of gendered adolescence. At best, girls are being supported through formal institutions using tools that were never really designed for girls or with girls. At worst, they are falling through the cracks entirely. Girls experience these cracks in obvious, day-to-day inequalities, like a lack of basic community services designed specifically for them. Less visible, and thus harder to combat and transform, are the forces that allocate resources at the national and international level without considering girls' wellbeing.

Community organisations often receive funding from one sector, implementing programmes using imported practice from another, all the while trying to hold onto their own deep knowledge about what it really means to be a girl in a given community.

Because so much of our work with girls is understood through this lens, which exists more in concept than in practice, we rarely have opportunities in international arenas to truly understand what girls' work at community level looks like. As such, the most transformational work with girls often stays hidden from view, and thus from potential new funding.

In short, there is a glaring need for a theory of practice for work that is uniquely of, for, and by adolescent girls. A theory of practice that offers a *coherent* approach to the work, starting with, indeed centering on girls in all their messiness and lived reality, and yet which is also conceivable in *consort* with the formalised sectors through which the money still ultimately flows. To do this, we must first begin by critically analysing the stories we tell ourselves about girls, asking where and how these stories are obscuring the realities of life at the unique moment of adolescence.

*Although the multiple forms of oppression that adolescent girls face should rightly see them front and centre of donor priorities and policy agendas, they are most likely to be shut out or forgotten.*

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## CASE STUDY: TOWARDS A FEMINIST VISION

In Sierra Leone, Purposeful seeks to work with community-based organisations in ways that are political and transformational – to understand girls is at the centre of our feminist vision for liberation. When we started this work four years ago, it became obvious very quickly that although we might think of these organisations as child protection actors, it was often not the case. Because of the way that financing of community work has happened in Sierra Leone post-civil war, and because of the flow of money through formal UN systems, and especially child protection systems, many of these partners have absorbed the language of the protection sector when this doesn't necessarily align with their politics or how they would practise this work if they had the flexible resources to determine the direction of the work themselves.

So, on the one hand, programmes are being designed and proposals written that sound like classic child protection work, but on the other hand when you get in a room with these CBO leaders and ask them to reflect critically, they have a much more nuanced understanding of girls' realities and what they are navigating every day. Many of these actors are women who were once these girls. They know on a level that is profoundly embodied, what it means to be a girl, how girls survive, how they thrive, and how they overcome. None of this lived expertise really tracks with the idea of girls as children that need protecting, nor does it find its way into the reports to the funders, or the ways the work gets talked about in the world.

At the same time, many of these organisations are increasingly being subcontracted to work with girls as implementing partners of the big INGOs, and so over the last five years or so, we have seen a lot of the 'girls-empowerment' perspectives creep into the language and the practice of these organisations. Suddenly, there's this focus on content and training, as if girls' marginalisation is the result of a lack of information and 'if only we could fill her head with enough empowerment content, somehow she would be liberated'.

So yes, we have these competing systems that we are attempting to push back against in our programmatic and advocacy work, and at the same time, we understand that these sectors are all actually piling up on top of girls and the organisations that support them in ways that can be quite oppressive. Ultimately, this colonial, patriarchal approach to 'aid' and 'development' is deeply disempowering for the leadership of these organisations, and we all miss out on profound opportunities for actual, real-life change.

## STORIES WE TELL ABOUT GIRLS AND GIRLHOOD

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – a framework that has uniquely influenced children’s work across multiple settings – integrates child protection perspectives into a rights-based framework, creating multiple and contested meanings of and between notions of the universal ‘rights subject’ and the child as ‘object of protection’<sup>6</sup>. In many ways, the tensions inherent in the Rights of the Child framework, map against the everyday tensions of working with girls. At opposite poles are two stories, each troublingly incomplete, about girls and girlhood that centre girls’ power and vulnerability as binary states.

### THE PROTECTIONIST STORY

On the one hand, it is perfectly reasonable to argue that girls are vulnerable and in need of adult protection. Indeed, this paper began with a stark overview of the compounding inequalities faced by girls, and the ways in which structures of oppression play out in uniquely damaging ways on their lives and bodies. Girls are the most likely of all populations to be distanced from community assets and services, and to be victims of interpersonal, economic, cultural, and structural violence.

### THE EMPOWERMENT STORY

On the other hand, another story has emerged that pushes back against this pathologising view of girlhood. This narrative presents girls as natural leaders, and as uniquely able to lift themselves, their families and communities out of poverty. In this story, it is possible to ‘empower’ a girl through a formalised development programme that focuses uniquely on girls and how they think, feel and act in the world. By supporting them to lift up their voices and become leaders, we might also empower a nation too.

Each of these stories about girlhood has taken root in powerful ways, influencing the form and the function of work with girls across sectors and systems. And yet, neither offers the full picture or enables funders, policy makers, and practitioners to see and act on the larger opportunity to support the nascent movement-building that is already increasing girls’ collective power at the community level. The former trope presents girls as victims besieged by threats, the latter prioritises individual girl stars whose grit and nerve enable them to navigate a perilous system and find safety and prosperity within it. Neither, as we’ll see, offers a perspective on power that might contain within it the potential to transform the systems and structures of oppression that made girls marginalised in the first place.

## THE SIMULTANEITY OF GIRLS’ POWER AND VULNERABILITY

It is clear to anyone working with girls, that even at relatively young ages, they are making complex decisions for themselves. Every day, girls are succeeding in making the best of their circumstances by deploying a range of sophisticated strategies, connecting with their peers and with social change processes on a micro and macro scale, in ways unique to the particular life stage of adolescence. It is equally clear that girls are choosing among a restrictive and often dehumanising palette of options, with limited access to assets, information, services or networks of social solidarity.

Further still, girls’ strategies for resistance for survival, for social change, are often unique to this life stage – a moment when there is an unparalleled appetite and imagination for a radically different reality.

*Yes, girls find creative ways to navigate risks, but these are not romantic visions of the exceptional girl leader, but strategies of resistance that girls everywhere have developed to survive the everyday.*



### CASE STUDY: TWO TRUTHS

At Purposeful, we ground our work in two fundamental truths. The first is that to be a girl is to live on the frontline of injustice. I think anyone who has worked with girls for any real time would be able to tell you this quite instinctively. The problem is that programmers and funders so often start and finish with this truth. But there is also another truth that lives alongside, that is catalysed by, and ultimately has the power to overturn girls’ marginalisation and oppression.

This second truth is that to be a girl is to resist. In every village, in every corner of the globe, girls are gathering, reimagining, pushing back to create better worlds for themselves and us all. The forces of oppression exert themselves on girls’ minds and bodies in profoundly violent ways, and yet girls find ways around and over and through and under. They run, they stay, they build, they birth, they survive, and they don’t survive. And most days they can be found, hidden in corners and out in plain sight, whispering with another girl, strategising with other girls, and sustaining because of another girl. In every place, across every epoch, they have been supported by women, old and young alike – women, who in silent deeds and in loud action, hold, heal, raise up, and radicalise a new generation of girls. We know this to be true because we are those girls, we are those women and we are their allies, and everywhere we have been and everywhere we have known, the same is true.

“Understanding one’s self, understanding one’s place in the world, and understanding one’s capacity to affect the world (i.e. agency) are all processes that begin to take shape during adolescence...[their] growing competencies in flexible problem-solving, their awareness of and concern with others, and their openness to exploration and novelty (Crone and Dahl, 2012) make adolescence a particularly opportune time to allow for agency and leadership (Flanagan and Christens, 2011). Indeed, young people have been at the helm of social movements for centuries.”<sup>7</sup>



### CASE STUDY: ON GIRLS’ RESISTANCE

In the early days of forming Purposeful, we were in a remote rural area running some dialogues. We met this group of girls who we call ‘the sand girls’, who have really become a bit of a beacon, a sort of perfectly crystallised example of why and how we do this work. The girls were all mothers – all friends – and they had carved out this way of being with each other that was just a very alive example of girls’ liberatory practice. They dug sand together and sold it at the roadside, and from that they saved together, they cared for their children together, they pushed back against violent partners through the power they drew from their togetherness. They negotiated for resources and access together. They were modelling alternative ways of being together in the world. Even though they had never encountered the language of feminism before, they were activists, and they were organising. They are, and will be, the base of a strong justice movement in Sierra Leone.

At the same time, there was absolutely nothing romantic about their circumstances. They were surviving literally day by day, often exchanging sex to meet their most basic needs. They were living in a community with no school, no electricity, no roads – a community in so many ways cut off, and yet a community absolutely shaped by imperialist forces of extractivism: of the mining companies that blight the country; of the changing whims of Freetown elites; of the shifting agendas of the aid agencies.

And of course, in every village, in every district the same thing is happening. Girls are living lives of extreme poverty and marginalisation – a poverty shaped by forces of globalisation and domination – and all the while finding ways to push back, to transcend, to model if just for a moment, a kind of different way of being together in the world. That is the truth of what it means to be a girl – of their power and their vulnerability.

There are, within this particular theoretical context, significant amounts of discussion about the level of ‘agency’ or ‘decision-making power’ that we can conceptualise as resting with individual girls, as if there were a neat correlation between increasing age and levels of agency, and thus, a simple age-based equation to assess a person’s need for protection or ability for action. These arguments can become stuck on the point and fail to move towards a more nuanced socio-political analysis that actually reflects girls’ real lives. Ultimately, this mismatch between the broad-brush theory and the lived reality of girlhood, creates a harm that girls are then left to solve.

However we conceptualise agency in our discussions, our primary aim should be to contribute towards transformation in girls’ lives, and in order to understand how to do that, we need our analysis to move beyond the question of complicity or force of actor or acted upon, and into the precise nature of the cultural and social structures which constrain (or have the capacity to contribute towards the liberation of) girls at the unique intersections of age and gender. Ultimately, this means building a world where girls can both access and imagine a range of meaningful choices in order to live in safety, dignity, and freedom.

### THE POLITICS OF GIRLS’ LIVED EXPERIENCE:

As we begin to do the work of better understanding girls’ social, sexual and economic lives, as we open up the realities of girls’ power and vulnerability in simultaneity, we begin to understand this work as political, as is all work that upholds or subverts existing power hierarchies.

Conceptualisations of girls as rights holders and as children in need of protection emerged at precise moments in our collective social histories, from very particular world views and vantage points. These are many and multifaceted. First came the cultural notions of childhood, charity and chastity in Victorian Britain, on which many Northern institutions of social protection have been built. Next to emerge were post-war ideals of universality from which international human-rights instruments were born. Most recently, are the liberalised notions of female empowerment, dominant in international development discourse since the early 2000s, which so heavily influence work with girls today.

“The creation of the modern state and national culture is integrally related to the creation of new sorts of gendered, and age-graded subjects and spaces, and the establishment of institutions variously engaged in spreading these constructions throughout society.”<sup>8</sup>

Why is this important to name? Because ideas of what it means to engage in acts of protection or rights promotion are not static, neutral, or benevolent ideals, but rather continue to be made and remade by political, social and cultural institutions. They are already alive and at work, and therefore, they can be re-formed and re-made in the service of girls’ own goals, strategies, and alternative visions for the world.

## TOWARDS A POLITICS OF PRACTICE

Whilst these discussions about power and powerlessness can seem quite academic, they play out in very tangible ways in the real world, prefiguring the form and function of our work with girls. As such, when we reframe the question from; 'are girls powerful or powerless?', and instead ask 'how can we build power with and for girls?', from whatever our sectoral entry point, we open up new ways of thinking about and doing this work. Re-centering the question of power ultimately offers us the best hope for the kind of sustainable, embodied change that can be maintained by girls and communities themselves. If, that is, we understand that power is itself the greatest protector against forces of domination and exploitation – that power *is* protective.

*Power is the greatest protective force against systems of domination. Power is protective.*

In this next section, we offer three practice-based examples that build from theories of power as protective, to offer new perspectives on our work with and for girls.



## 1. On solidarity and collective power

*"As elsewhere in the world, traditions of human dignity have always existed in African societies. Under a communal and inclusive society, rights are claims not against the state but against society. 'My humanness depends on your humanness.' It emanates from a social paradigm based on reciprocity, solidarity, and inclusiveness – values far richer than the basis on which modern human rights have been founded"*

– SYLVIA TAMALE<sup>9</sup>

From Marx's ideas about class consciousness to social movement activist-theorists of today, there is a deep well of human knowledge on the transformational possibilities of power as horizontal, autonomous, and collective. Indeed, since time began, humans have always engaged in the process of collectivisation, resisting but also fundamentally reimagining formations of power, both social and structural. Solidarity is a core principle of collective action, precisely because of the way it presents an alternative vision for relationships based on values of humanity and reciprocity, rather than the individualisation and exploitation of dominant systems of power.

Solidarity and collective power are also key principles in transformation work with girls. Evidence from work with girls demonstrates the importance of having strong social networks, as it relates to decreased risks of violence and improved future outcomes. We've also seen the power of identifying with other people who have a shared experience, and the transformational effects of connecting one's experience to a larger systemic issue. This is especially important for girls who are so often blamed for violence and discrimination in helping them move from self-blame to a realisation that there are larger systems at play that are responsible for this harm. This often creates a connection for girls that sparks their resistance.



## CASE STUDY: BUILDING COLLECTIVE POWER

All of Purposeful's work is organised around a power-building strategy. Simply, this means that we look across many facets of power and use this as a lens through which to understand what girls need of us. One of our flagship initiatives is 'Building Collective Power', where we draw on movement-building theory to build a base of activated, connected, and politicised girls.

What's interesting about some of our work in this space is that it looks similar on the surface to the safe space model of many INGOs and big agencies. The difference in our work is the centre of gravity, the understanding of power. Formalised safe space programmes often decouples the work from a power analysis and radical feminist origins and bring girls together only as part of functional platforms to deliver development messaging about health, education, jobs, and parenting.

The idea of female-only safe spaces has been a bedrock of feminist organising for time immemorial. It is not a new idea and can never effectively be constructed through a toolkit or paint-by-numbers methodology. There are many examples of intergenerational safe spaces across Africa – often linked with ancestral processes – working to subvert dominant colonial and patriarchal structures. These models are uniquely responsible for radicalising girls, building networks of sisterhood and solidarity, and creating new blocks of social power. When connected to its radical, rooted, transcendent origins, the safe space can be a powerful tool to realise this vision.

In Sierra Leone, we are currently supporting 15,000 of the most marginalised girls across the country, in partnership with 5 locally rooted organisations. Girls' Circles are led and held by young women mentors and aim to be places of joy, solidarity, consciousness-raising and politisation. The 602 mentors who hold Circles across the country accompany girls on a journey to develop the tools to analyse the situation of their lives, start to ask why they face specific challenges, and imagine a new reality for themselves.<sup>10</sup>

At least this is the idea! This more political vision for girls' work at scale and the realities of certain types of funding, often ends up conflicted. There is so much unlearning to do about what it means to support girls en-masse in ways that are genuinely flexible and responsive. There is a lifetime's work in fact, to practise when and how to step in and out as adult allies, to balance the burden of reporting and donor accountability in the current development context, and what girls need of us to remake the world for themselves. Those things are so often not the same as each other, and the instinct to default to the status quo is strong in all of us. Holding onto the politics of our practice is the key, asking; What really are the radical roots of a safe space? Why is this a liberatory methodology, and how do we hold fast to that as our North star?

When we centre in solidarity, we dispel the myth that the solution to lives of violence can be found in the individual work or in the individual mind of the singular survivor. It is through work that builds connections, sisterhood, and solidarity between groups of girls, who may find ways to keep each other safe, to push back and model alternative ways of being with each other in the world.

## NOTES ON THEORY

### WHY IS SOLIDARITY KEY TO OUR WORK WITH GIRLS?

Adolescents are generally excluded from female-only spaces but are not afforded the same freedoms as pre-pubescent girls whose sexuality does not yet offer a threat to conservative social orders.

As girls enter adolescence, their social worlds shrink, while boys' worlds expand. They are often confined to the walkable community, making socialisation challenging".

Because girls are most likely to be distanced from assets, services and other power commodities in community, they are even more reliant on the connective bargaining power that comes from negotiating as a block.

Solidarity builds social capital and safety, and it also makes life more meaningful, even joyful. Both things we want for girls.

## NOTES ON PRACTICE

### HOW DO WE BUILD SOLIDARITY WITH GIRLS?

Human connection built over time is a precursor to solidarity – to talk, to connect, to play. As programmers, this means ensuring there is space and time available for girls to just 'be'. We need to avoid the instinct to cram an initiative full of functional content.

Trust is another bedrock of solidarity. Consider methodologies that support girls to be open, to share truths, to offer advice, and to be in each other's sacred confidence.

In places where it is hard for girls to negotiate for time and space to be together, understand your role as an adult ally. How are you negotiating for space in community that is just for girls? What are you doing to advocate for girls' rights to be together?

Safe spaces that bring girls together are being deployed across the world as functional development tools and as sites of collective resistance, and the differences are not always so easy to spot, at least on the surface.

"In practical terms it is quite possible and even likely, that a young women's group engaging in [transformational work] is not easily distinguished from a girls club where [work that upholds the status quo] is the most frequent activity. It is the focus, direction and movement of the work that makes the difference: that it moves away from established patriarchal defined hierarchies, that it moves from the local to the global, that it seeks dialogue and transformation."

– JANET BATSLEER<sup>12</sup>

As this quote suggests, it is *both* the underlying theory and the political practice of the work which makes the difference between work that upholds the status quo, and that which seeks to transform it. The key point is that it is perfectly possible to bring girls together into safe space programmes without creating any real, substantive changes in their lives. Below, we offer some brief thoughts on the 'why' and the 'how' of transformational political safe space programming, for practitioners interested in re-evaluating their own practice in order to build collective power with girls.



## 2. On challenging hegemonies of power

"Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transfers of information."

– PAULO FREIRE<sup>13</sup>

Beyond holding collective space, a consciousness about how that space is filled is key. Here, an important contributor is Antonio Gramsci<sup>14</sup>, who drew the distinction between domination by violence and domination by consent. These two variants of power, he showed, are not mutually exclusive, but dovetail into each other. And while Gramsci's predominant focus was on class relations in society, his analysis goes a long way towards explaining the multi-faceted ways in which capitalist systems establish their domination over girls and women, and perhaps most critically, the insidious nature of that domination.

Why is this important for our work with girls? Because if patriarchal oppression plays out in a very lived way in the choices a girl is offered, and perhaps even more insidiously in how that oppression constrains the choices she can imagine for herself, then she may fall prey to the ambivalence and fatalism that often comes when contemplating a lifetime of oppression, of which violence is just one element.

Drawing from Gramsci's philosophies, activist theorists like Paulo Freire and bell hooks<sup>15</sup>, help point towards a framework to develop counter-hegemonic processes of political education and consciousness-raising with and for marginalised groups, like girls. Rather than passive consumers of depoliticised learning content, we come to understand, as in the traditions of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or *Teaching to Transgress*, that when we support girls to question the nature of their exploitation, we lay the groundwork for radical change in their lives.



## CASE STUDY: A FEMINIST SAFE SPACE CURRICULUM

When Purposeful started its Girls' Circles, there was already a government-approved curriculum in place for informal education and safe space initiatives. In fact, in our earliest days we'd actually been involved in trying to make this curriculum more 'girl-friendly'. As we critically assessed the content, we realised it was quite harmful in a lot of ways. That, at its worst, it was reinforcing a lot of the problematic ideas about girls and their bodies, about 'good-girls' and 'bad-girls' – perspectives that were just completely divorced from the realities of what it means to be a girl trying to survive in Sierra Leone. We tried editing some of these sections, but the curriculum still just wasn't working for us.

We realised that the reason it didn't work in the context of a programme meant to build girls' power was because it was not designed to do this! The curriculum started from the assumption that girls have an information deficit, and our job was to fill them with that information. The curriculum wasn't asking girls to question why, to push back, to re-imagine, precisely because this was never meant to be the objective of informal education programmes. What we were ultimately reminded of as we went through this process of trying to reform this curriculum, is that you cannot do power-building work with apolitical tools. Your work will always, by nature, end up reinforcing the status quo.

So, we went back to the drawing board. We worked with two specialists from South Africa and Kenya who had experience working with extremely marginalised girls in informal settings, but most importantly, who came to this work from very political, feminist perspectives. They have both been deeply involved in racial justice and feminist movements on the Continent and in Europe and understood on a fundamental level that consciousness-raising work is the absolute bedrock of struggles for justice. Most importantly, they understood how to do that work with village girls who generally couldn't read, who hadn't been to school, and who were totally disconnected from political concepts like feminism. They understood that girls needed to connect with each other through their own stories, to ask girls why things are the way they are, to play games and sing songs where girls could imagine how things might be different. All of this is the work of liberation – sometimes it is no more complicated than that.

Across the world, in programmes of many sorts, practitioners are using formal and informal learning materials, curricula and teaching methodologies in their work with girls. The underlying 'why' and the practice-based 'how' of these tools, will ultimately mark the difference between work that is transformational and that which upholds the existing status quo for girls.

## NOTES ON THEORY:

### CHALLENGING HEGEMONIES OF POWER IN THEORY

As girls reach puberty, gender notions begin to take root and embed, both in the expectations that communities have of girls' behaviours, and the expectations girls have of themselves. Caught in a limbo between adulthood and childhood, girls' options begin to narrow.

As girls' social worlds shrink, their abilities to imagine different ways of being and doing rapidly diminish. This is especially true in context where there are few alternative images of womanhood.

At the same time, girls at this particular life stage have a unique capacity to practice radical imagination, if they are supported with the tools and spaces they need to exercise and communicate what they imagine could be true.

Informal learning curricula in development programmes can unwittingly reinforce some of these gender stereotypes, just as girls and their families need support to think beyond them.

## NOTES ON PRACTICE:

### CHALLENGING HEGEMONIES OF POWER IN PRACTICE

At the most basic level across all of our programming and curriculum development processes, our job should be to support girls to ask why things are the way they are and to imagine how they might be different.

We can do this across all that we do, including more functional learning conversations. Here, we should pay particular attention to language that reinforces narrow ideas of girlhood, while drawing out the political dimensions of life-skills programming. Imagine, for example, how lessons about the body could be made transformational by centering conversations about autonomy and choice.

We can use creative methodologies like role-play, collaging, song and movement to project forward into the worlds we imagine, moving beyond the here and now to imagine how life could one day be made different.

With more skilled facilitation, we can begin to connect the experience of girls' individual existence with broader systems of oppression. By connecting individual life-stories with lessons from history, sociology and politics, we can begin to learn how everyday people, through everyday acts of resistance, have remade the world for the better.



### 3. On power and resistance

“... we respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resisters but by letting their practices teach us about the complex inner workings of historically changing systems of power.”

– LEILA ABU-LUGHOD<sup>16</sup>

*We choose the term resistance very deliberately. It is best able to capture the formal and informal, bounded and unbounded, spontaneous and organised, individual and collective ways in which girls are pushing back and imagining better worlds for themselves and us all.*

Emergent from Gramsci’s philosophies, subaltern-studies looks at asymmetries of power and resistance from the perspective of those who are ruled over by (neo)colonial forces. There is a lifetime worth of theory to be offered about the relationships between power and resistance – from Marx<sup>17</sup> to Foucault<sup>18</sup> to post-colonial theorists like Said<sup>19</sup> and Spivak<sup>20</sup> to those engaged in the newer practice of activist scholarship today. Read together, these theories help to construct an understanding of resistance as a complex interplay between actors, in relation to state institutions, and the many more diffuse forms of cultural domination that distort the very nature of knowledge itself. This offers an interplay between people and power that, nonetheless, helps us to understand that “*where there is power there is resistance*”.<sup>21</sup>

But what of these arguments in relation to adolescent girls? Firstly, they compel us to explore the ‘underside of power’ – to remind ourselves of the most basic idea that to be a girl is to resist. Through history, from Africa’s anti-colonial movement to the Arab spring, to climate justice organising and everything in between, girls have always sparked and sustained transformational change. To say this is not to romanticise resistance, but to understand more precisely the workings of power in girls’ lives, and of their abilities to shape and remake it too. Ultimately, these arguments bring us back to where we started – a reminder of adolescent girls’ power in the context of dominant and dominating structures and institutions.

“Girls’ ideas, stories and theoretical contributions remain largely hidden from view...they continue to appear in both the public and academic domain only as occasional images – as visual objects rather than as intelligent and intelligible political subjects...in contrast to girls’ absence from the literature...they are figures of central importance to contemporary processes and discourses of global citizenship.”

– JESSICA TAFT<sup>22</sup>

Emergent understanding of girls’ autonomous organising points us towards the girl-led strategies and practices being deployed by collectives across the world to push back against injustice in self-defined ways. Because of the nature of girls’ lives, a great majority of these strategies are oriented towards ending violence in multiple forms, from sexual violence to state-sanctioned violence, from capitalist extractivism to the everyday violence of climate breakdown. Some of these are highly visible projects but others are quieter, hidden in plain sight wherever girls are to be found. As such, there is much learning to be gained as we work to keep girls safe, by asking girls about their own strategies for protection.



#### CASE STUDY: SUPPORTING GIRLS’ AUTONOMOUS ORGANISING

No matter how much we reframe the way we ‘do’ programming, that work is always going to be defined in some way by adults, by funding agendas, by organisational priorities of some form. Even as a feminist organisation committed to girls’ power-building, Purposeful is still defining agendas both micro and macro across all our work. This means we have to find structural ways to ensure resources are getting to girls and young women in ways that are entirely defined by them. So, in addition to our initiatives to build girls’ power through Girls’ Circles and other more radical safe space models, we also directly resource girls’ collectives across the country.

Some of these groups are organising more formally in urban and semi-urban spaces. They are using creative methods, like song and theatre and radio, to shift perceptions and challenge norms. They are also addressing their limited access to resources and opportunities and thinking of ways to use the funds to get more money i.e., as small businesses or buying school supplies. Others are more like ‘the sand girls’ we talked about earlier – girls organising in rural areas, often illiterate and without internet access, and who would never be able to access grant resources. These groups are identified through extensive networks of women-led community organisations and supported by our incredible team who travel the country to meet these groups, to take proposals orally, and to deliver cash on an ongoing basis. These collectives are doing the real work of social change, every day in their communities, and could not be a better example of what is possible when girls’ collective power is resourced

## SUMMARY:

### What are we learning about the theory and practice in our work with girls?

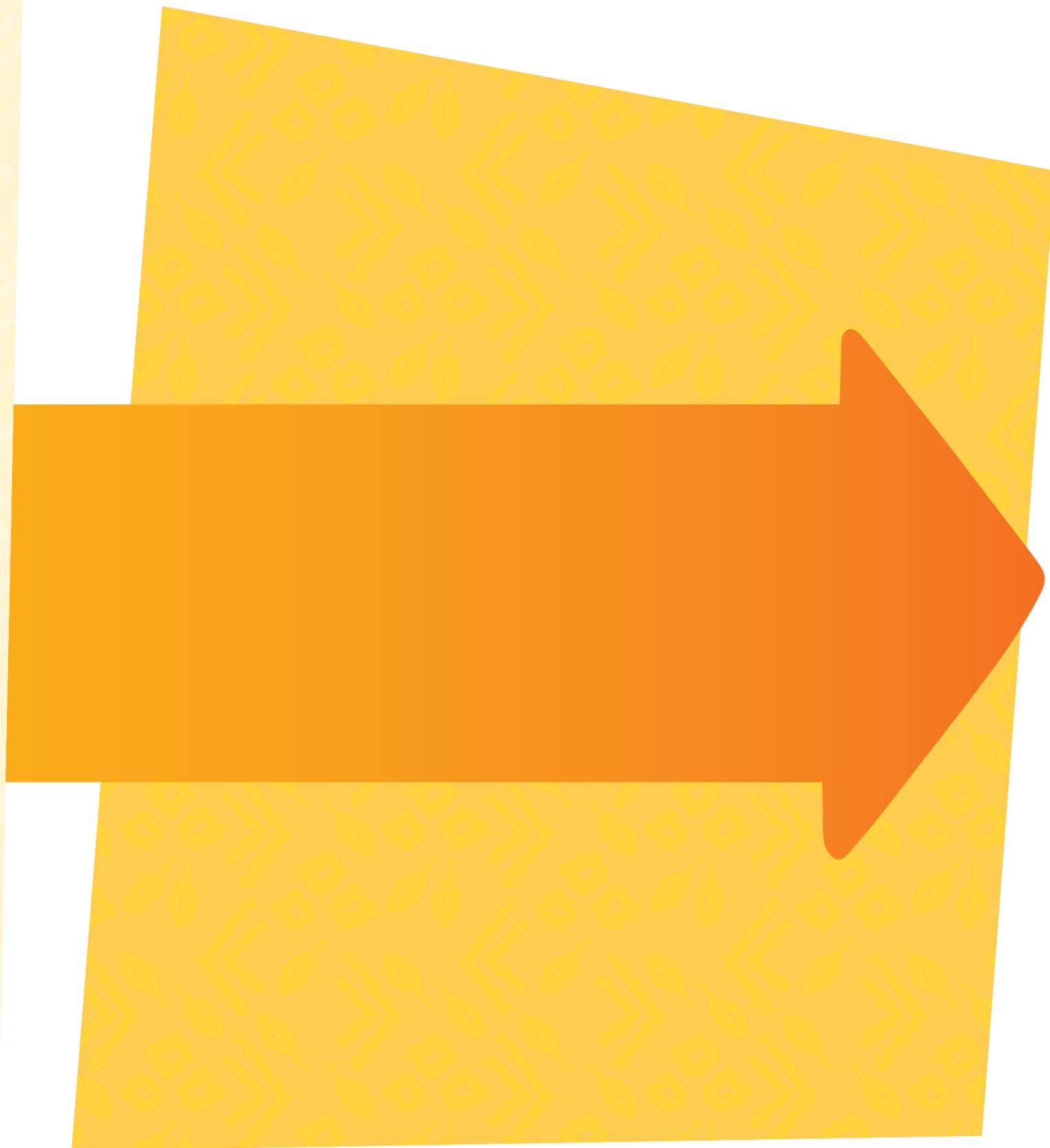
Adolescent girls should be a focus across human rights, social justice and development solely because they deserve to achieve their full range of indelible rights as human beings. Because adolescent girls are often at the forefront of leading social change, they are great contributors to advancing social justice and human rights causes, accelerating progress across many sectors. When we truly situate our work in the realities, potentials and *power* of this particular life stage, the possibilities are endless. To do this, we must begin with a more precise understanding of the fullness of girls' social, sexual, economic and political lives.

First, this requires us to move beyond cultural and professional preoccupations with power and protection as binary states. When we do this, we begin to develop an understanding of girlhood as dynamic – not stuck between childhood vulnerability and adult power – but a place of social practice and political action that is distinctly of girls. This contradiction between girls' power and their need for protection sits at the very heart of what it means to work with girls. Rather than a tension to be resolved, this is something we must hold. This in turn, directs us towards a more nuanced way of thinking about girls and what they need – of their right to be held, to heal, to play and to lead.

The case study from Purposeful's work in Sierra Leone provides powerful lessons for both practitioners and funders on how to turn theory into practice, in ways that lead to genuine, transformational change for girls and by girls. Doing so successfully, however, means embracing a fundamentally new way of working with girls – trusting them and their allies to truly design and lead initiatives. A key lesson in this section is the interplay between theory and practice. Practitioners, with little time and resources, often feel the pressure to move to design and delivery. Stepping back and grounding work in theory can sometimes seem like a luxury only for academics and think tanks, especially when funding is highly time-bound, both in submitting proposals, and then (if successful) rushing to stand up programmes.

In the notes on theory and practice, we offer a roadmap of sorts, for how to connect the two in simple, meaningful ways. In the following sections, we make the case for funders to reform how they award money and select grantees in ways that enable implementers to more readily connect theory to practice.

For us, the most powerful lesson of all, is the incredible opportunity that stands before a myriad of stakeholders to reimagine what it means to work with adolescent girls. Whether you sit in the child protection world, the women's rights field, the education sector or public health; whether you are a funder, a practitioner, or a community-based organisation; whether you see yourself as a feminist organisation or more broadly as an advocate for human rights, building girls' power is both a strategy for success and a moral imperative.



# Part Two:

## Resourcing power building



A new role for philanthropy in mobilising resources for girls

### INTRODUCTION

Funders and donors have a significant opportunity to revolutionise how the world works with girls, and to use their resources to increase girls' power in communities and build towards a more just world. In Part Two, we unpack this role for philanthropy in mobilising resources for girls and detail the specific changes in strategy and tactics that funders can take to centre their work on girls' power.

Almost any donor focus or priority relates to girls, whether it is population driven, issue driven, or movement driven, and yet we know, far too often, adolescent girls are invisible in donor priorities or the frameworks that are not reflective of girls' experiences and needs.

Adolescence is a critical life stage. It is marked by a time of change and transition, in body, role and societal positioning. Within the funding community, they suddenly enter a major identity gap – they are no longer children, but neither are they women. Funders' use of formalised, dominant narratives influences the form and the function of work with girls across sectors and systems. Even 'youth' frameworks are often male-centric, and girls find themselves left out of these spaces and opportunities. Funders overlook, and under-resource, the authentic solutions girls themselves have created to protect themselves and build their futures.

In this section, we explore how the misleading narratives about girls and their relative priority in the global development system leads, ironically, to continued under-investment by funders. Over the past two decades, highly visible narratives and campaigns about girls have created an illusion that a cohesive 'girls' field' exists. Indeed, the false sense of a mature field may be causing some donors to conclude that work with girls is well-covered, and that the pendulum should swing back to focus more broadly on children, boys or other groups.

*Indeed, the false sense of a mature field may be causing some donors to conclude that work with girls is well-covered, and that the pendulum should swing back to focus more broadly on children, boys or other groups.*

We will consider how these narratives and philanthropy's desire for frameworks and metrics often locks out the most authentic, community-based work created by girls and their allies in favour of INGOs, larger NGOs and other intermediaries who can deliver polished proposals, reporting, data analytics and monitoring and evaluation. We offer practical ways for funders to break out of this harmful trap by changing how they find, vet, fund and support grantee partners, and we argue for funders to move more and better resources to the transformational work girls are doing in their communities and beyond. Importantly, this section shares examples of funders who have centred their work on girls' power with powerful results.



## The girls' funding landscape

Over the past 10-15 years, there has been an increase in energy around and commitment to resourcing adolescent girls. There are new actors coming to this work, ranging from large international organisations, bilaterals and multilaterals to small grassroots community-based organisations, movements, and beyond. In some spheres, the conversation about funding this work has moved beyond the question of 'why?' to a more complex questioning of 'how?' This is all exciting progress. However, this has not translated into a significant increase in resources reaching adolescent girls directly. Because there is so little tracking of funding based on age, sex, and other important demographics, we do not have the data to quantify how much funding exists. However, the little data we do have paints a stark picture. The World Bank estimates that less than 2 cents of every \$1 spent on international aid is directed towards adolescent girls.<sup>23</sup> Philanthropic funding is equally anemic, with only 7% of funding going to women and girls, and with no breakdown of how much of this reaches girls. Meanwhile, a 2017 study by AWID<sup>24</sup> revealed that over 99% of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and foundation grants do not reach women's rights and feminist movements. In philanthropy, the researchers found that women's rights grants are only \$422.3M USD, equivalent to 0.42% of the total foundation giving in 2017.

When considering power-building as a strategy, another useful way to look at the landscape is by the relative financial size of the actors doing the work. A 2014 study found that young feminist organisations had a median income of just \$5,000 USD per year<sup>25</sup>. Given the impact of oppression girls face globally and the significant role adolescent girls play in creating social change, it would benefit all social progress if more resources flowed to adolescent girls and their allies. The dearth of resources is only part of the problem. The quality of the resources – how grantees are selected, what activities are covered (or not), what gets measured, what counts as success – are equally essential. At present, funders are often constrained by limited data and the incomplete stories they believe about girls and girlhood. This leads to missed opportunities, as often, well-intended grantmaking reinforces the status quo instead of building girls' power and delivering the transformational change that donors seek – both for girls themselves and for more just, secure, and prosperous communities.

The existing frameworks and narratives used by funders at best limit what is possible for girls, and at worst, create harm. But we also see a profound opportunity to rewrite this narrative and build new funding models that reflect and support the lived experiences of girls.



## The dominant narratives driving the funding landscape

The increasing attention on girls in formal spaces would have been simply unimaginable two decades ago. This attention to girls, and the persistence of bringing them into formal spaces, creates a mirage that girls are being well resourced. It also gives an illusion that girls are centred in defining frameworks and decision-making that directly impacts how these resources are allocated. In reality, the two dominant narratives continue about the role of girls in social change that have occupied the public domain over the past decade, and more consequently, decision-making spaces: The Girl Dividend Framework and the Empowerment Framework.

While additional narratives about girls across other sectors and movements do exist, and there are existing narratives that go further back into history, we lift up these two narratives for a number of reasons. Firstly, while girls are often invisible or reached only by proxy across most sectors and movements, these dominant narratives continue to break through to make girls visible. This means that these are often the stories and narratives that drive resources and decision-making about girls. Secondly, these narratives are often positioned as the more progressive approaches to girls' work or as girl-centred narratives. In Part One, we discussed the binary between girls' empowerment and agency/protection. Under these narratives, protection and the sectors associated with it are seen as less progressive or transformative for girls than an empowerment narrative. It is therefore worth interrogating where these currents, programming and funding in girls' work comes from and their impact on decisions made by funders and other power-holders.

### GIRL DIVIDEND FRAMEWORK

This narrative argues that by supporting a girl to lift up her voice and become a leader, we also will empower a community and a nation. It is rooted in the idea that gender inequality is holding back economic development, and so the investment in girls and women is needed to ensure positive outcomes and economic prosperity. It is also framed as 'smarter economics' and supported by 'investment cases' that measures the potential long-term return on investment of investing in, say, programmes that reduce child marriage or increase school completion.

### EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORK

This narrative depicts individual girl leaders, completely disconnected from their social and political context. This often presents girls as natural leaders, who are simply awaiting empowerment by the right intervention, devised by a formal institution. In this framework, we often see images of this girl in the singular – the inspiring, extraordinary girl who has leaned-in, found her inner-resolve, battled against great peril, and overcome the odds.

## BREAKING DOWN THE GIRL DIVIDEND FRAMEWORK

While the ‘feminisation of development’ can be traced back to the Beijing Conference in 1995,<sup>26</sup> the focus on adolescent girls as a distinct population worthy of attention – and resources – only really began in earnest 15 years ago. From Plan International’s ‘Because I am a Girl’ that ran from 2012 – 2018 as a global girls’ education campaign, to the work of Girl Effect and the celebrity-powered girls’ empowerment focus of INGO and donor campaigns the Girls Dividend Framework has dominated the narrative over the past decade.

Whilst many of the actors amplifying this narrative mean well and are genuinely trying to get girls on the global agenda, it has proliferated a very simplistic narrative of investing in girls. There have been several critiques about the girl dividend over the past decade, including this below from the *Young Feminist Wire*, namely its subject-object orientation and how it obscures the systemic oppression that girls face.

“This focus on investment, as if girls are commodities to be invested in does not lead to achieving social justice for girls. The fact is, ‘investing in girls’ does not magically sweep away patriarchal oppression and cultural norms that constrain girls’ capacity to fully enjoy their rights and freedoms, make their own decisions, and have those choices respected. Investing and empowering remain buzzwords, that only provide a language for corporations to frame their contribution to corporate social responsibility but are actually devoid of any real meaning, understanding or knowledge of the real issues that oppress girls, which in fact if addressed, can threaten the existence of these corporations. Investing in girls does not erase the systemic violence that girls, young women, transgender and gender non-conforming youth face due to the current economic structure that continues to reinforce patriarchy, colonialism, war, and imperialism, all of which have devastating impacts on them.”

– GHADEER MALEK AND NELLY BASSILY<sup>27</sup>

Further, others have argued that this myth of the adolescent girl as saviour of self, family, community, and country drives an agenda where girls are taught to take responsibility for their own experience of marginalisation and oppression, and leave the structures of power untouched.

“Girls are effectively imbued with incredible (if not ‘superhuman’) power of ‘stopping poverty before it starts’, as if poverty through history owes to a simple lack of individual female agency, rather than deeply embedded inequitable structures and systems.”

– SYLVIA CHANT<sup>28</sup>

The Girl Dividend Framework misplaces who and what is responsible for creating systematic harm, taking us away from an approach that addresses the systems at the root of girls’ oppression. It imagines a future world where the negative outcomes for girls – child marriage, school leaving, early pregnancy, low employment, and income – have been reduced, unleashing a wave of new ‘human potential’. But it fails to say how this might unfold, in practical terms, or take a hard look at the systems and structures that lie behind the power imbalance that drive the negative outcomes girls live with every day.

In the end, the Girl Dividend Framework reduces girls to economic actors whose value is how much return on investment they can produce for the market economy, with relatively few stars rewarded with a place in the status quo and the mass trapped in poverty. This approach takes us away from what is ultimately most important: building girls’ power so they can live lives of safety and dignity, and possess the freedom to choose who and what they want to be. It also takes away the fact that girls should be able to be leaders if they want to be, or choose to be something else entirely, and not be relegated to second-tier status – that girls have the right to play, experience joy, and live a full life, including a full range of choices of the role they want to play in society.

## BREAKING DOWN THE EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORK

The Empowerment Framework, often closely linked to the girl dividend story, is another mainstream narrative held about girls. This story tells us that girls can be given power, and often results in funding strategies and interventions that focus on building some sort of internal capacities in a girl. It often leads to skills-building, or economic empowerment, where she might receive a chicken or a sewing machine to support her livelihood. While this can be an important part of personal transformation, it often portrays the girl as an individual, isolated from her social-political context. Despite the use of the word power in the word, many empowerment programmes de-emphasise power, providing neutral programming that does not address the power structures that keep girls from their own innate power. Girls are born powerful; it is the structures around them that try to remove them from power, and current empowerment frameworks do little to address these structures.

We can build power in a way that upholds the status quo for girls or subverts it. *Emissaries of Empowerment*<sup>29</sup> offers a critique of the empowerment framework and articulates how the dominant narrative works to uphold and reinforce the status quo, instead of subverting it, by decentering power. While they do not speak directly about the impact on adolescent girls, if we connect different parts of their critique, we can understand how the consequences of this paradigm extend to girls’ work and speak to a narrative that has shaped the adolescent girls’ field:

“The word ‘empowerment’ was introduced to the development field by feminists from the Global South [in the 1980’s]. Empowerment was an approach ‘to begin transforming gender subordination and in the process to break down other oppressive structures as well’. “Empowerment” has come a long way from its origins. What was once a revolutionary paradigm for challenging power relations has become instead a means of re-inscribing them. And although feminists in the Global South called on the development industry to create space for women’s organisation and resistance, gender programming by Western organisations is a purportedly apolitical enterprise. Empowerment interventions substitute marginal improvements to the material conditions of women’s lives for the capacity to mobilise to shift the conditions of their repression.”

– KATE CRONIN-FURMAN, NIMMI GOWRINATHAN, & RAFIA ZAKARIA

The authors continue to discuss the problematic nature of the stories and programming that comes out of this paradigm – from what stories and narratives are told on stage to problematic programming interventions that centre individual solutions rather than transforming power dynamics.

*“This is especially unfortunate, because many of these women already inhabit a profoundly depoliticised context in which they are marginalised by the state and kept at a distance from the levers of power. These interventions enter this space, and rather than bridging this distance, offer “empowerment” instead of power.”*

The Empowerment Framework not only isolates girls from their socio-political context and power, but it often also isolates them from her community and the intergenerational groups of girls and women they are working alongside, learning from, and organising with. In the media and funding spaces, we often see images of a singular girl, a girl who has found her inner-resolve, who has battled against and overcome the odds. We think of her as an extraordinary girl.

And while girls can be extraordinary, such myopic depiction of their leadership obscures the challenges girls face and the victories they achieve. It makes invisible what it takes to do this extraordinary work and the community they are often connected to and that is bringing them up in the work. We want to celebrate the incredible achievements girls make, their role and contributions to social change, but we do not want to: 1) isolate girls from what allows them to do this work in the first place; 2) have this narrative drive resources to programmes that lift up this individualistic model for girls; and 3) take away from the need to transform the systems of oppression that create harm in the first place.

*“As funders (and the general public), we need to abandon models of “saving” individual girls as well as exceptionalising them by lifting them up on pedestals. Rather, it’s time to acknowledge the collective power that they represent. They are already organising and resisting in their communities, and it is time that they are funded on their terms.”*

– JUDY DIERS<sup>30</sup>

One final critique of these dominant narratives is what they do to break down global solidarity between girls and women and keep us from seeing the connection of our humanity. It creates a dynamic where there are a few girls who are championed and visible and are often called on to speak for girls as though they are a homogenous group.

This dynamic further nurtures the scarcity and competitive way girls are funded, by giving visibility to a few champions and ignoring so many of the girls who are doing critical work in their communities. On a global level, the transnational fight for gender justice is replaced by an individualised, instrumentalised concern for the ‘other’, helping to obscure the root cause of marginalisation and oppression as that which affects all girls and all women everywhere. We see, for example, a range of campaigns pitched at girls in North America, framing them as liberated, and potential liberators of the ‘poor’ ‘oppressed’ girl of the Global South. Through the purchase of merchandise and social media clicks, she can be ‘just like you’ proclaimed one famous campaign.

*“The post-feminist spectator is not the target of universal claims about the power of global sisterhood, the moral urgency of gender justice, or the power of feminist solidarity to affect political transformation; she is instead appealed to on the basis of market rationality, where women’s empowerment is desirable to the extent that it generates overall economic growth.”*

– SYLVIA CHANT<sup>31</sup>

Underscoring all the concerns about the Empowerment Framework is the ambiguity about the word itself. Today, “empowerment” has become entirely diluted. It appears in the mission statements of everyone from Save the Children to the Islamic State and is used to refer to everything from access to technology to gender equivalence in parliamentary representation. Despite (or perhaps because of) its lack of definitional clarity, the term is a proven fundraising powerhouse, with billions of dollars raised in the name of ‘women’s empowerment’.<sup>32</sup>



## Consequences: A funding field that sidelines girls

Despite the increase of having girls ‘in the room’ and ‘on the agenda’, girls are not the ones who created these narratives. Instead, funders and other power-holders shaped the frameworks to help align work with girls to their larger strategic priorities and then to explain their investments – often in neat and simple fashion – to governance bodies, media, global policy forums and various stakeholders. Some of this was well-intentioned, for example trying to position girls in a framework that would speak to a poverty alleviation agenda. But regardless of intentions, these simplistic narratives have filled a void about girls, who had otherwise been invisible, without centering their full, lived experience. In the absence of another narrative, it has magnified and become the dominant way power-holders talk about, resource, and make decisions about girls.

This proliferation has created a distorted perception of how much funding is allocated to adolescent girls, making it appear much higher than it actually is. Another impact, even more challenging to unpack, is how the popularity of these narratives has created the false sense of a cohesive, unified ‘girls’ field’. While we know there is no unifying approach to girls’ work, these narratives create an illusion that a mature and active field is out there, easily and readily available to be funded.

While there is indeed incredible work to fund in every corner of the world, it often looks radically different from these popular narratives and lives well outside the frameworks that drive funding decisions.

And inevitably, it requires donors to change how they fund – and who they fund – to make the biggest impact with adolescent girls.

Funders cannot easily fund what does not exist. The result of this distorted perception of a girls' field is that instead of understanding the multiple ways that girls' work is happening and finding ways to fund it, a technocratic, and often apolitical, way of working with girls has emerged and persists.

This has massively influenced who and what has been funded, with little funding reaching direct work with and by girls in communities and movements. It has opened space for large organisations to design and run girls' programmes, create technical and research units centred on girls, and launch fundraising campaigns that capitalise on girls, often without moving resources to them. Some of these initiatives have produced solid programming and research. However, for the most part, resources don't reach girls and their allies already doing this work locally on shoestring budgets. In some cases, the large INGOs and larger NGO's undermine community-based work by poaching staff, drawing away girls and co-opting community allies. Often, INGOs, funded by large donors with their own frameworks, strategies and timelines do not build their work around the lived experiences of adolescent girls and the wisdom of the women (most often) supporting and working alongside them.

These frameworks are often appealing to funders because they appear to be easily quantifiable and can be reduced to a small number of resources having impact, whilst in reality, the kind of social change necessary to address the roots of girls' oppression and holistic support for their work requires long term, flexible funding. This creates challenges for those doing holistic and long-term social change work to fundraise against a narrative of quick fixes and investment. Consequently, the quality of resources needed to support this work fails to emerge, with unfortunate impact for girls.

“There has been an NGO-isation of our movements. The girl groups and girl activists that do not fit within the framing of this NGO-isation are losing out [on funding opportunities]. We [as funders] need to trust groups that do not fit within those set boxes we feel comfortable engaging with.

– FRANCOISE MOUDOUTHE<sup>33</sup>

*While there is indeed incredible work to fund in every corner of the world, it often looks radically different from these popular narratives and lives well outside the frameworks that drive funding decisions.*

*The false sense of a girls' field allows for girls to get lost where they are, which is everywhere. There is a sense that someone else is capturing girls in their funding, often making girls the responsibility of no sector or movement.*

Simply put, an entire field, or perhaps an illusion of a field, has emerged centred on these dominant narratives. This approach misses the most essential pieces of the puzzle – girls themselves, and those who have been leading, supporting, organising, and co-conspiring with them for decades. The good news is that this imbalance creates a powerful opportunity for funders to reimagine how they support work with girls and bring policymakers and implementers along on the journey of building girls' power in meaningful and practical ways.



## **An alternative: A funding field that truly centres girls**

Adolescent girls should be a focus across human rights, social justice, and development, solely because they deserve to achieve their full range of indelible rights as human beings, and we know adolescent girls are often at the forefront of leading social change and are great contributors to advancing social justice and human rights causes, accelerating progress across many sectors.

If we look at almost every movement globally, girls are there making change, leading from the front and organising from the back. This is true for climate justice, sexual reproductive health and rights, racial justice, indigenous rights, land rights, food sovereignty, gender justice, and immigration reform to name just some. A mere cursory scan of history books begins to reveal snapshots, traces, residue stories of girl leaders, culture shapers and movement-makers through the ages. From Africa's anti-colonial movements to the Arab Spring to almost every progressive movement globally today, girls have been there leading, participating and organising.

Across all these critical social movements, girls are rarely seen, and almost never resourced for this labour. The lack of intentional focus on girls *where they are* means more often than not, they remain invisible, underfunded and unreached. When girls do receive funding, it is often restricted or bound by a particular sectoral approach, dictating what they can do and how they can do it. This in turn, stifles, rather than supports, their activism.

“Girls organise with very little resources and support within our social movements. Their contributions and labour are made invisible by a system that only recognises 'experienced' labour. Therefore, experience equals many years of doing the same thing, and that is what ends up getting resourced. Well, girls have the experience of being girls so why not recognise their labour and resource them?”

– PURITY KAGWIRA<sup>34</sup>

*This approach misses the most essential pieces of the puzzle – girls themselves, and those who have been leading, supporting, organising, and co-conspiring with them for decades.*



Young women were instrumental in the civil rights movement's most memorable moments. They were just as engaged behind the scenes, and together girls desegregated schools in the Jim Crow Deep South. From the anti-apartheid movement to Fees Must Fall in South Africa, to immigrant, indigenous, queer, anti-capitalist organising across the Americas, girls and young activists continue to mobilise and lead movements across the world. They are increasingly visible leading from the front and driving from the back, across ages, places, identities and epochs.



Photos, clockwise from top left:

– Civil Rights March on Washington. *Photo by Library of Congress. Leffler, Warren K.*

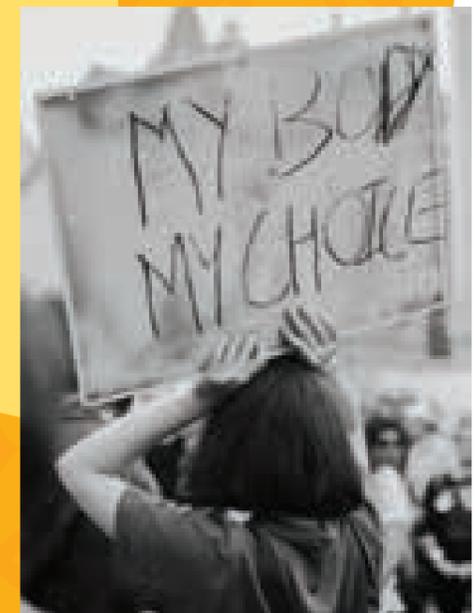
– Young African American woman on anti-racism protest. *Photo Drazen Zigic.*

– South African demonstration for Fees must Fall Pretoria- Gauteng. *Photo Paul Saad.*

– 4 September 2019, Women's march in Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

– Beirut, Lebanon, Dec, 30, 2019 – Protesters gather at central bank. Lebanon is plunged in its worst economic crisis and deflation has risen in a country with one of the world's major foreign debts. *Photo Karim Naamani.*

– Cape Town, South Africa. 7 April 2017. Protesters march to parliament in protest at President Jacob Zuma. *Photo Aqua Jennings.*



There is an opportunity to transcend this narrative and support a more comprehensive ecosystem of funding that reflects and supports the lived experiences of girls, and follows their strategies, analysis, and tactics. If funders centre on girls, they can ultimately work to build a world where girls can both access and imagine a range of meaningful choices in order to live in safety, dignity and freedom. In doing this, funder strategies and tactics can reflect the reality that girls are organising everywhere all the time, regardless of an individual funder's focus or where they sit within the funding ecosystem. There are no neat frameworks or singular 'how-to' guides for this work, but instead multiple ways funders can centre girls in their strategies and tactics.



## From theory to practice: Breakthrough tactics in funding

While there is not a singular, cohesive, girls' field to fund, there is an ecosystem that sees, lifts up and supports girls across communities, movements and sectors. In order not to miss girls where they are – which is everywhere – funders must explicitly name them (and then resource them) across all their strategies, through regional, movement, sectoral or issue lenses. There is a growing ecosystem of funders and organisations who are creatively finding ways to resource girls who are organising, resisting and collectivising in their communities. This is critical infrastructure that is transforming how girls' work is resourced globally.

In this next section, we lift up some examples from across this infrastructure and begin to explore some of these breakthrough funding moments. These moments span sectors and movements and start to demonstrate ways girls can be reached, with the right resources, right where they are. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but rather a set of illustrative offerings that help to show how different funders overcome obstacles in reaching girls through a range of creative approaches. Further, although there is one example under each 'breakthrough', this does not mean it's the only, or even the first, organisation to do this kind of funding. Similarly, each example could sit under multiple breakthroughs but for the purpose

of providing sharp examples, we've limited how these funders are situated in the paper.

### **PROVIDE FLEXIBLE FUNDING TO WORK, LED BY THOSE MOST IMPACTED BY INJUSTICE, AS THE SINGLE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO CREATE CHANGE**

Grassroots movements and community-led organisations are creating systemic change on the most critical social, economic, and ecological crises globally, yet they are chronically under-resourced. This is no different for grassroots movements and organisations, led by and serving adolescent girls, and those with children and youth more broadly. The most transformative work with girls is locally rooted and is often led by girls and young women, as well as older – mostly female identified – adult allies.

Sometimes it is structured as an organisation, sometimes a collective, and often it's an individual in the community who sees the need and does the work in their own capacity.

In the funding ecosystem, larger funders often have a harder time accessing these grassroots movements and community-led organisations. Large funders are usually at a geographic distance from grassroots groups and therefore are not always best positioned to find or fund them, and the distance makes relationship building more challenging. They often have complex reporting, monitoring and evaluation systems, and many lack the capacity to take on the administration of a large number of smaller grants, having been staffed and structured to manage relatively fewer larger grants. Finally, large funders often have policies that limit grants to registered organisations who can meet strict due diligence requirements, disqualifying grassroots groups from even applying for funding.

There are, however, a growing number of regionally or locally based funders that are well positioned to find, fund, and build relationships with grassroots groups, as well as global funders that structure their grantmaking, so it is deeply grounded in movements locally, usually through advisories and/or participatory processes. Most often, they are led by, or centre, people from the places they serve and are deeply rooted in local movements, meaning they have a nuanced understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities facing a community.



### **FRIDA**

In 2009, in order to respond to the dearth of resources going to young feminists, ideas for a young feminist fund started to emerge at a meeting coordinated by feminist activists in Marrakech, Morocco. The Association for Women's Rights in Development and Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (Central American Women's Fund) joined together to begin incubating a young feminist fund.

Officially launched in 2011, FRIDA partners with young and emerging feminist-led organisations to support them to make the most impact in their communities. Using a participatory grantmaking model, FRIDA provides flexible funds and core support, which allows groups to define their own budgets and dedicate funds to where it is most needed. In response to the needs of groups, FRIDA also provides different kinds of capacity and support to promote the sustainability of each grantee partner in all the ways they want to, but also supports them to stay connected with broader social movements.

FRIDA has regional advisors that are connected to groups, as well as focal points within the team, who can often communicate in the language of the group. This, alongside the flexibility, non-hierarchical engagement and core funding, has helped to nurture a relationship built on trust, despite FRIDA being located 'nowhere'.

There are a growing number of initiatives and grassroots funders focused on centering girls in their grantmaking, from the organisations that were a part of the [Grassroots Girls Initiative](#), launched in 2006 to the Girls Funds that came together in 2018 (see page 46).

There have also been efforts to resource girl and young women-led work, that often has the least access to funders. Given the lack of trust that funders have afforded girls, as well as funder restrictions, efforts have been made to resource the work of girls and young women with the least access to funding. Work that is truly girl-led or centered, most often, does not fit into a sector or category, but is more holistic in nature, making it difficult for many organisations to apply for siloed funding and difficult to do with restricted funding.

There are some funders finding ways to get past these restrictions to provide flexible funding to do the work necessary to reach girls, and to support those who are really doing holistic work with girls. Some of these funders are deeply local, such as the Central American Women's Fund, HER Fund, and the Bulgarian Women's Fund, while some are more global in reach but with infrastructure that allows for deeply local funding, such as FRIDA – The Young Feminist Fund, the Global Resilience Fund, and Purposeful.

One key advantage to many of these funders is their approach to deep participation, centering the decision-making power and leadership of girls and young women at the core of their funding models. This process itself is important and often a transformational experience for girls and young women, who are often kept far from decision-making tables. It also results in much better, more intersectional, grantmaking.

### **APPLY AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS TO BREAKDOWN FUNDING SILOES**

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to lift up the specific oppression that Black women face, is the concept that people have multiple, layered identities, including but not limited to race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability, and that oppression is compounded for those living at those intersections of oppressed identities.

Entrenched systems of patriarchy, exploitation and domination mean that all girls and all women are deeply vulnerable to violence and discrimination. Race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, ability, age, and other factors work together to deepen exclusion and harm even further. Given the compounding effects of multiple forms of structural inequality they face, and the unique intersection of their age, it is no surprise that adolescent girls are the most invisible and silenced across all communities.

Age is a critical factor that is too often ignored across movements and sectors. Not yet adults, girls are often missed in women's rights and development sectors. Children and youth spaces often oversee the gendered experience of those who identify as girls, and age squeezes them out of these frameworks – they are too old to be children and often, too young to be considered youth. Deeply entrenched ageism also means that the role girls play across movements, such as climate justice, racial justice, and peace and security, is often invisible or undervalued. Yet, we are seeing funders break through and centre age, along with other identities, to lift up and centre girls' roles across movements.

By applying an intersectional lens to grantmaking, we are able to resource movements to address the greatest systemic issues of injustice and centre girls in their full identities. This framework moves funders away from the programmatic siloes that so often focus on only one part of girls' needs, such as their health or education.



### **THE GLOBAL RESILIENCE FUND**

As the realities of COVID-19 began to unfold in early 2020, it soon became obvious that girls and young women, trans and non-binary people – already battling the compounding effects of patriarchy, white supremacy, and imperialist extraction – would be the very worst affected. In response to this, a group of funders launched The Global Resilience Fund to directly support girls and young feminists' brave, brilliant and transformative strategies to respond to the crisis in their communities.

One of the most powerful break-through moments of the fund so far has been the intersectional lens it brought to its grantmaking from the beginning which meant being inclusive of girls with disabilities. This resulted in the fund resourcing an unprecedented number of disability rights groups. How was this possible? Disability rights activists were included from the launch of the fund – from the funding, NGO and young feminist community. They were involved with every aspect, from design to decision-making. This is just one example that is significant to lift up given the frequent lack of a disability rights lens across philanthropy (and beyond!).

At the root of ensuring intersectional grantmaking, is an activist-led participatory process across the fund model, lifting up a diverse range of voices in the design and decision-making across all aspects of the fund. The intersectional lens ensures the fund reaches girls and young feminists who are often invisible in funding efforts and directly supports their leadership. It also means that the 234 groups funded to date, are organising across a diverse range of movements globally.

### **EXPERIMENT WITH A MORE POLITICAL APPROACH TO FUNDING GIRLS**

*“Girls are not issues. Ten years ago, we were talking about girls' issues and girls as issues. We, as funders, need to remember girls are people, girls are activists, girls have power. We need to fund and support that power instead of trying to throw money at issues. This is the shift in mindset we need to see.”*

– FRANCOISE MOUDOUTHE<sup>35</sup>

The stories we hold true about girls, both the dominant stories and micro stories that exist across sectors, most often remove girls from what they need most – power. In Part One of this paper, we explored the often-fraught preoccupation with girls as rights-subjects or objects of protection. We challenged readers to reframe the question of whether girls are powerful or powerless, and instead ask how we can build power with and for girls?

Taking this frame to any sectoral entry point, and seeing that power is a protective force, we open up new ways of thinking about, and resourcing, this work. Funders across sectors and movements have had breakthrough moments in bringing a clearer political lens to their work with girls. The following case study highlights an example from the children's rights sector. This is an important example of how a sector that traditionally does not talk about power, or adolescent girls more broadly, is experimenting with bringing a power building analysis to work with girls. This case study is more deeply explored in Part Three and bridges power building theory and philanthropic practice.



## CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION FUND

CRVP, a regional child rights and social justice grantmaking organisation in East Africa, decided to have a more explicit focus on adolescent girls within their theory of change. Their theory of change recognises that catalysing deep systemic change depends on girls taking action on their own behalf; shifting norms and patterns of behaviour around gender, power and violence, as well as, creating an enabling policy environment that facilitates girls' access to resources and services. In a sector where adolescent girls are often invisible or seen as helpless, but at the same time impacted by frameworks and ideologies, this was already transformational. With a deep commitment to preventing violence against children and adolescents, CRVP saw an opportunity to bring power-building theory into an experimental funding project to build girls' power in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda as a violence prevention strategy.

CRVP began the process by supporting partners to centre on girls. Partners benefited from a six-month learning process that gave them the resources and tools to listen to girls and understand their experiences, challenges, and vision for themselves. This process was transformative for partners. It shifted how partners saw girls, not as beneficiaries of their programmes, but subjects of their own lives who are taking action on their own behalf. As a result, girls drove the development of the programme content and took leadership in implementing the activities. Through this approach, the programme moved money to community groups working with girls in ways that catalyse and sustain transformational change: centering in a power-building approach; foregrounding learning and unlearning; and most importantly lifting up what girls tell us they need to transform their own realities.

## MAKE EXPLICIT FUNDING AVAILABLE FOR GRANTEES TO CENTRE JOY, HEALING, AND SPACE TO BUILD SOLIDARITY ACROSS MOVEMENTS

Funders often focus on the trauma or hardship that girls experience. And while a mere glance at statistics, in any context about girls, highlights the hardship and trauma girls face based on gender and other overlapping identities, this is not the end of their story. We also want girls to live in their full humanity and see their joy, healing, space to dream and play.

By providing flexible resources to locally rooted work, funders can support work that sees and celebrates girls' full humanity and provides space for all of the complexity of girlhood. Additionally, creating space in budgets for organisations to come together, connect, and build solidarity across their work can be a lifeline for girls and young women, and their adult allies, who are often isolated in this work.



## THE SOUTHERN BLACK GIRLS AND WOMEN'S CONSORTIUM

The SBWGC funds Black girls and Black girl-serving organisations across the southern United States, including the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Virginia.

The consortium is coordinated entirely by a community of Black women in philanthropy, activism, and girls' work, who hold deep roots in movement-building throughout the Southeast. The partnership recognises their critical role and the importance of centering the lived experiences and leadership of those most impacted by deep-seated injustice.

Informed by research conducted by SBWGC through listening sessions with hundreds of Black girls and women throughout the South, funding is used to advance services and supports, ranging from affordable housing, entrepreneurial endeavours, legal assistance, mental and physical health.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, they launched two funds; one to fund Black girls and women who were organising during the pandemic, and a second called The Black Girl Joy Challenge. This fund provided grants to girls who submitted videos or social media posts to show how they were spreading joy during the pandemic. Examples ranged from artwork for the elderly to a make-shift drive-in movie theatre.

“While we believe that girls must have a central role in their own liberation and that no movement is effective without their vision and leadership, we must also remind ourselves that our work is not to create clones of our over-worked feminist activist-selves. The girls’ movement is not served by creating the expectation that girls will take up their leadership in the ways that patriarchy demands of us, as adult feminists. Rather, I suspect that if we follow their lead, we might find new ways of working that allow room for play, joy, creativity, radical imagination, and the space to come in and out of movement or not to engage at all. Liberation work for girls may never be a vocation, but a necessity, and therefore possibly fleeting – that has to be okay. Our task as advocates and comrades, is to be in solidarity and to use our platforms to resource them as they need, when they need.”

– RAMATU BANGURA<sup>36</sup>

### DEEPEN THE CONVERSATION ABOUT THE ROLE OF GIRLS IN WOMEN’S RIGHTS

There are some incredible women’s rights organisations and funds that effectively include girls in their strategies and programmes, some lifted up in other sections of this paper. Additionally, there are some powerful feminist organisations that successfully centre on girls, include girls and are even led by girls. However, we also know that girls are frequently excluded in these spaces, and funders and policymakers should be careful not to assume that the term women is automatically interchangeable with girls and similarly that feminist equates a framework that builds girls power.

There is a great opportunity to continue working through the challenging intergenerational issues across movements and move closer to approaches that truly support both women and girls, and not create false choices between one group and the other. However, right now we must be diligent and explicit in our language and not equate these terms or we risk making girls more invisible or misinterpreting the funding landscape. The following case study demonstrates one example of the power in bringing girls into women’s rights spaces for intergenerational dialogues, collective advocacy and organising.



### KARAMA GIRLS INITIATIVE

Since 2005, Karama has led a growing movement to end violence against women and promote women’s participation across the Arab region – building networks, institutions and constituencies to promote ideas and build support for positive change for women across the region, from Morocco to Yemen. In 2019, Karama began a new initiative to support girls’ leadership and decision-making in and across women’s rights organisations and platforms in the region. Their innovative intergenerational approach saw girls, young women, and older women’s rights activists partner to listen, learn, and design new strategies. One of the most extraordinary legacies of the project is a group of young women from 10 countries across the Arab region who are working together on joint advocacy initiatives, and who have built incredibly strong bonds of solidarity that will sustain the next generation of transnational feminist movements in the Middle East and North Africa.

“The initiative has been the most remarkable learning experience, for everyone involved. The work was led by the next generation of leaders from across the network – young women who had worked closely with feminist elders. People don’t understand the lives that girls live now in the Arab region. Many have only known crisis – conflict, occupation, instability. It’s been truly remarkable to see their interaction with the young leaders, to see exchanges between them, opening conversations about aspirations, giving the confidence to crush their fears. The interaction and attention from the young leaders gave the girls the freedom to dream. For the young leaders, it’s inspired them to launch their own initiatives, their own organisations. The work with girls has shown the interdependence between the generations, and it has been the most remarkable incubator of talent I have seen.”

– HIBAAQ OSMAN, FOUNDER AND CEO OF KARAMA

### EXPERIMENT OR DEEPEN SUPPORT TO GIRLS ACROSS MOVEMENTS

As argued throughout this paper, girls are organising and agitating across almost every progressive movement globally. Girls are resisting everywhere, all the time. They are resisting at home, constantly negotiating for space, to be heard. They are resisting marriage, violence, and they are agitating to stay in school and to make decisions in their communities. They are changing laws, hearts and minds and behaviours. Girls are organising with each other – behind closed doors, on the street, at school, while they farm, while they play, and as they care for their children. And girls are embedded in movements – often challenging conventional leadership styles and organising models when they come together. Working across generations with young feminists and older activists, they are at the forefront with struggles and resistance that often spark movement moments.



## GLOBAL GIRLS FUNDS

In 2018 and 2019, a diverse group of grassroots funders committed to centering adolescent girls across their funding strategies, came together to share learning, explore how girls are showing up across movements, and strategise on how to move more and better resources to girls and young women. These funds include FRIDA – The Young Feminist Fund, EMpower, MADRE, Ms. Foundation, Thousand Currents, and Global Fund for Women.

Collectively, these funds work across a wide range of movements, from climate justice, women's rights, food sovereignty, youth rights and young feminist funding, economic justice and beyond. By intentionally supporting adolescent girls across movements and sectors, these funds create space for girls to be recognised and resourced right where they are leading, organising, and resisting.

They are drawing on fresh, creative, and brave tactics that are making the unimaginable possible.

Yet they are often still invisible. Girls' work is not openly acknowledged and therefore is not compensated, and aside from a few 'stars', girls are rarely invited to decision-making tables. By prioritising girls in funding across all progressive movements, funders can support girls where they are – leading, participating, and organising change. It is one of the most effective, and transformative, ways to reach adolescent girls and support their priorities.

### TRUST AND FUND GIRLS' EXPERIENCE AND STRATEGIES

*"Listen to the experience of girls... A girl's life is expertise enough for her to be a credible interlocker for us as funders. Girls' experiences are experiences of resistance."*

– FRANCOISE MOUDOUTHE<sup>37</sup>

Girls and young feminist groups are using creative strategies to effect the change they want to see in the world and are finding new ways of working that are distinct from their adult allies across movements. There is so much to learn from girl activists about how to be in community with each other and how to transform communities and the world. Yet, because of deep-seated ageism, many funders do not trust girls with resources, creating significant barriers to girls receiving support for their ongoing activism.

When we trust girls and resource their leadership, strategies, analysis, and ideas, they show us another way is possible.



## WITH AND FOR GIRLS FUND (WFG-F)

The WFG-F resources girls' activism and organising in healthy, sustainable, and responsive ways. Housed at Purposeful – a globally oriented feminist organisation rooted in Africa – it supports both girls' resistance and their reimagination, supporting girls' activism and organising with flexible funding, accompaniment, and connections.

Some of the lessons learned from listening to girls are:

- **Application processes** should be simplified, accessible, including considering language accessibility and application submission processes in varied formats (e.g. Whatsapp via text or video message).
- **Flexible funding** is needed for smaller grants and seed grants, now during COVID-19 more than ever, to be able to support communities. Girls also require regular flexible funding as they tend to organise around particular issues rather than long-term programmes. Once the issue is addressed, the same girls will move on to organise around something else.
- **Shift funding to support people in online spaces.** As work rapidly moves online, there is a need to both invest in technology but also emphasise sharing resources. This includes prioritising intersectional work and emphasising the importance of team and capacity building. This calls for funders to fund 'invisible programming' happening online.
- **Access and dialogue with funders.** Donors need to make space at their tables for girls and to use their might to influence each other towards an environment of listening, learning, co-designing, and co-shaping the feminist world, while ensuring girls and young women have ownership. Space should also be cultivated for grassroots activists and organisations to feed information back to funders, including challenging structures and suggesting improvements, ensuring loop backs and accountability mechanisms.

## INTENTIONALLY REACH GIRLS THROUGH SECTOR STRATEGIES

Most funding that could, or already does reach girls, comes from the formal development, human rights, and humanitarian sectors. This includes education, health (primarily sexual and reproductive health and rights), children in development, women in development, humanitarian response, and other formal sectors. It's therefore essential that funders intentionally centre girls further in their sector strategies.

For example, we know, as cited earlier, that girls are the most severely affected group during a humanitarian crisis – more likely to drop out of school, suffer from violence and discrimination, marry early, become pregnant and lose their livelihoods.

Traditional humanitarian response efforts often fail to reach adolescent girls and do not resource the incredible work that girls are doing and leading during times of crisis. VOICE recently conducted its feminist assessment of humanitarian aid, interviewing 200 individuals and organisations contributing to the humanitarian aid sector. Despite commitments to crisis-affected populations, they were denying women and girls their rights to participation, consultation, and services, and in some cases, subjecting them to its own types of violence.<sup>38</sup>

If girls are made visible across sectors and are resourced across sector responses, there is a profound possibility to learn from and be strengthened by the brilliant social change strategies, resistance and activism so often led by adolescent girls and their allies themselves.

*“Covid-19 has made an already difficult situation for millions of girls even worse. But girls everywhere are standing up and leading change. They are ready for the challenge. We need to listen to girls and support girls for the future they're reimagining.”*

—LAUREN RUMBLE<sup>39</sup>

This is one example of many where girls are invisible across sector responses. There are also examples across sectors where funders are working to move girls from the margins to the centre. This next breakthrough shares an example within the migration sector.



### THE GLOBAL FUND FOR CHILDREN, FONDO SEMILLAS, AND THE CENTRAL AMERICAN WOMEN'S FUND

Conversations about migration are often highly political and happen in the policy arena, driven by the likes of the International Labour Organisation, the International Organisation on Migration, and UNHCR. Girls are rarely discussed in conversations about migration, yet we know girls are migrating in high numbers globally.

In 2017, the three funders came together to resource community-based solutions to girls' migration. They partnered to centre girls in their efforts to address migration with women and children across the contexts where they work – essentially, creating space to make girls more visible in their work. They provide flexible resources and spaces to connect for grassroots organisations working across Central America, Mexico and the United States.

## PARTNER ACROSS THE ECOSYSTEM

We have seen through the recently launched Global Resilience Fund what is possible when funders from across sectors and silos come together to focus on girls, breaking down barriers to build intersectional approaches that reach girls around the world in unexpected ways. We have seen this through other examples lifted up in this report- such as the Girls Funds and the collective work to centre girls in migration strategies – ways in which funders came together to see and resource girls across movements and sectors. Girls live across sectors; they are organising across movements and their needs and dreams span across every area of work funders focus on. In order to meet the full needs of girls, funders need to collaborate in new and better ways. Funders can use their collective power to better redistribute resources to girls and those who care about them and to advocate for more and better resources.

The next breakthrough highlights a collective of funders who have been focusing on resourcing girl-led organisations since 2014.



### WITH AND FOR GIRLS COLLECTIVE

The With and For Girls Collective is a group of justice funders committed to resourcing girls' activism for the long term. Together, the collective resources the With and For Girls Fund, using these insights to influence and advocate across philanthropic and development spaces for more and better resources and programmatic practices with and for girls. Made up of Women's Funds, International NGOs, Public and Private Foundations, the WFG Collective is the only collaborative of its kind, drawing from different points in the girls' funding ecosystem.<sup>40</sup>

As a collective, they are showing what is possible when girls are put at the centre of resource distribution. The collective is doing this by learning and transforming their own practices to re-centre girls' power and decision-making, as well as influencing other funders and key stakeholders. Friendships born out of this space have created the opportunity for unique funding windows and partnerships and show us what is possible when we model in our own practice the ways girls work together in powerful collectives.



## The way forward: Towards a thriving ecosystem

In this section, we have started to dissect how the false narratives about girls constrain donors from understanding and investing in the powerful solutions that girls and their allies are building at the grassroots level. We have provided a roadmap for funders to look hard at the systems, frameworks, procurement models, metrics, and reporting requirements they use, which often leave the community-based groups doing the most interesting work, unable to access resources. We have also shared examples that shed light onto the ecosystem of funders and organisations who are creatively finding ways to resource girls organising, resisting, and collectivising in their communities. This critical funding infrastructure is transforming how girls' work is resourced globally.

It's important to note, these funders, and others, that make up this ecosystem are public foundations, intermediaries, and re-granters. They hold deep expertise in moving resources to locally led work, and yet, like many of the organisations they support, the funders that make up this infrastructure are severely under-resourced. Their budgets are tiny compared to their private, corporate, multilateral, and bilateral funder colleagues.

To truly move towards social change globally, there is a need to drastically increase the funding to support this infrastructure and the power-building strategies that centre girls across sectors at large. This means more resources flowing to the existing infrastructure so it can grow and reach girls, and their allies, with even more critical resources for their work.

This will also require larger funders to transform their own institutions to be able to move more and better-quality resources, addressing access to resources – from systems, procurement models, metrics to the reporting requirements that funders use. It calls for interrogating the narratives funders hold true about girls that influence the quality of resources and the kind of work they will fund.

By moving beyond the popular narratives about girls and funding girls' work that has a power analysis, and is truly centered in and led by girls, funders can directly see what kind of transformation is possible and how it will advance all of their work. We need to fully

*It's important to note, these funders, and others, that make up this ecosystem are public foundations, intermediaries, and re-granters. They hold deep expertise in moving resources to locally led work, and yet, like many of the organisations they support, the funders that make up this infrastructure are severely under-resourced. Their budgets are tiny compared to their private, corporate, multilateral, and bilateral funder colleagues.*

move beyond making the case for girls and have robust conversations about how to collectively move our institutions to resource girls' power-building. This will require transparent, open discussion, and space to learn and reflect with people who might hold different perspectives. It will require discomfort, courage, and humility.

The need is too great, and the gap is too large for funders not to come together and think about how they can creatively move resources to this work, regardless of where they sit in the ecosystem. Pivoting grantmaking practices will take time and effort – it's not a simple flip of a switch. Funders need to consider their own place in the dynamics of power and bring a healthy dose of humility and listening to the change process.

The upside for funders is significant – building girls' power translates to longer-term, sustainable impact across multiple sectors, including education and employment, health, and justice. Indeed, it will be impossible to achieve transformative change (including SDG metrics) without using and embracing a power-building lens that prioritises girls.

# Part Three:

## Practitioners as power-builders



Lessons from an experimental project in East Africa

### INTRODUCTION

There are multiple wins for practitioners in the child rights and violence prevention sectors if they adapt their programming to reach adolescent girls. First, and most obviously, adolescent girls will have the chance to realise their full human rights and potential. Second, the already strong foundation of the children's sector stands to gain a useful new tool by bringing in a power-building framework as a violence prevention strategy, with gains for all children at risk of violence. And third, practitioners can learn from, and be strengthened by, the brilliant social change strategies, resistance and activism so often led by adolescent girls and their allies.

One of the biggest barriers to realising girls' potential is the giant divide that exists between two poles. At one end is what girls know they need to transform their own lives and what their community allies know works to lift girls up and enable them to lead. On the other, is how child protection actors design and deliver programmes. Part One in this series looked at some of the origins of this divide, offering perspectives on how to evolve our understanding of girls and girlhood and move beyond some of the unhelpful binaries that define this work. Part Two looked at the ways in which funding practices reinforce these binaries and create real-life challenges in re-orienting our work with girls.

In this final section, we look at how power-building theory and adapted philanthropic practice came together in an experimental project to build girls' power with child protection actors in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. An initiative of the Children's Rights and Violence Prevention Fund (CRVPF), the project was designed to move money to groups working with girls in ways that help to ferment and sustain transformational change. The initiative was built around three key understandings: recognising the work is grounded in the politics of social change; foregrounding learning and unlearning to move past false narratives; and, most importantly, lifting up what girls tell us they need to transform their own realities.

This experiment provides early learning on how some of the theories outlined in Part One can be applied to funding practices within the children's sector and grassroots organisations working with children. By bringing both a gender lens and a power-building framework to work with girls, we begin to see how this could advance the broader goals of the children's rights sector and promote the safety, dignity, and wellbeing of adolescent girls.



## Origins of the power-building experiment

Adolescent girls in East Africa face a compounding set of challenges due to their gender and age. Their lived reality is shaped by a pervasive continuum of sexual and gender-based violence. Across the region, girls represent 7 out of 10 new HIV/AIDS infections, and experience high rates of both early pregnancy and maternal mortality. Girls also continue to be held back from resources and opportunities that would otherwise transform their lives. Girls have a lower rate of enrolment in secondary education. While they are a key part of the labour market, they are more likely to be in unpaid labour or to work in the informal sector. As a result, they continue to have less access to or control over resources that they could use to make choices about their own lives.

**The Children's Rights and Violence Prevention Fund (CRVPF) is an East African regional grantmaking and social justice organisation supporting community action to prevent violence against children and adolescents. CRVPF partners with community organisations and local NGOs that work with children, adolescents, and families, using a cluster model and place-based approach to create safe and supportive environments. The organisation's approach to violence prevention is anchored in children's rights, supported by a strong belief in the voice and agency of children and adolescents.**

Whilst existing funding for violence prevention work, through formal development frameworks, is flowing into East Africa, those resources rarely centre on girls or draw on their lived experience and the strategies for safety they use every day to protect themselves. The CRVPF, in partnership with a private philanthropic entity, recognised the opportunity to spark and sustain a nascent feminist funding ecosystem for girls in the region. The initiative, launched in 2019, included a strong focus on experimenting with what it might look like to fund power-building approaches for, with and by girls at the community level.

As a regional funder, CRVPF straddles these different East African realities in interesting ways. Although its work has traditionally been situated within violence prevention spaces and primarily in partnership with child protection systems, CRVPF brings a strong rights-based approach to its work. It had already prioritised adolescent girls in other regional projects, notably around the issue of girls' migration, and it was open to thinking about new ideas and theoretical perspectives to working with girls.

In addition to this willingness, CRVPF had the right partnerships and relationships to push the Violence Against Children (VAC) sector in East Africa. The team was collaborating closely with a private donor invested in adolescent girls' rights, interested in bringing a power-building framework and gender lens to work with children, and willing to fund an experimental project with an emergent methodology. Based on many years of practice in communities in East Africa, as an organisation but also amongst different staff members and consultants, CRVPF was afforded a high degree of trust by local partners. Groups were willing to go on a journey of change with CRVPF even if the final destination was not quite known.

Because of CRVP's ecosystem approach to preventing violence, it had a keen understanding of the interlocking ways in which girls and their community allies would need to be held through a project of this sort.

The team also had a unique perspective on the journey of change that partners would need to go on in order to centre girls' power and shift away from the language and strategies associated with traditional child protection approaches that focus on girls' vulnerabilities and the need to isolate them from potential harm.

Perhaps most significantly, CRVPF was clear that the project would need to support girls as they organise their own formations, collectives and groups and be very deliberate about engaging adult-led organisations at the same time. Rather than understand girls' leadership as distinct from other community-led social change currents, the programme sought to situate community-level work with and for girls within change ecosystems, leveraging networks of sisterhood and solidarity across the community.



### THE PROJECT IN A SNAPSHOT

#### Goal:

Integrate a power-building framework into child protection and prevention work through community programmes and regional re-granting.

#### Purpose:

- Support community programmers to listen to and learn from girls directly, through a power-building lens
- Develop tools and processes to help practitioners integrate power-building perspectives into their programmes
- Explore grant-making principles and practices to drive resources to girls' power-building at the community level
- Learn and document the journey of integrating two conceptual frameworks
- Promote collaboration between organisations by creating collective learning and action spaces, eliminating competition for funding

#### Process:

- Provide Planning and Learning grants to clusters of partners across four countries, offering space to listen to and learn from girls, and build cross-organisational relationships
- Provide tools to engage girls in conversations about power and analyse the content of those conversations
- Bring groups together into experimental design workshops, using insights from 'power-mapping' tools to design programmes
- Award multi-year grants to implement programmes, with accompaniment from national consultants and continued opportunities to listen to and learn from girls



## A Deep Dive into the Power-Building Journey: Strategies for Success

Although it was quite common for the partners in the project to talk about empowerment, it was much less common to talk about power, and even less so in the context of girls' lives. In order to embed a more political practice into partners' programmatic approaches, the project had to take them on a journey to examine how girls experienced unequal power relationships and understand how programming can be deployed to transform relationships of power within and among social groups. This required new ways of thinking about girls and what they need – but also about the role of community programmes in social change processes.

The journey was designed to centre politics, practices, and new types of philanthropic relationships in order to liberate the organisations from the business-as-usual approach to girls' programming. To do this, CRVPF and its partners developed a series of strategies and approaches to support that journey.

### STRATEGY: BUILD SOLIDARITY AND COLLABORATION – A CLUSTER APPROACH

In philanthropy, there is a growing recognition of the imbalance of power between those who fund and those who are funded. Another relationship also warrants attention – the relationship *between* grantee-partner organisations. The nature of how funding is awarded sets up a competitive relationship amongst organisations who are often working in the same communities towards the same goals. It is difficult to build trust with an organisation that might be 'up against you' in the next funding round, especially when opportunities to access funding for community organisations are so limited.

CRVPF wanted to seed a new dynamic that would support groups to be in relationships of mutuality and solidarity. They invited organisations to identify other community groups they would like to work with and submit joint funding proposals together. Over time, these relationships progressed from transactional (exchange of information) into deeper dialogue (thinking and planning together) towards genuinely co-owned and co-created initiatives. As partners modeled new ways of being in relationship with each other, new ways of seeing girls and showing up differently in this work emerged.



### MEET THE LYATONDE CLUSTER – UGANDA!

The Remnant Generation and Gals Forum International joined together to address violence

against girls in rural and peri-urban areas of Lyantonde District in Western Uganda. They are focused on supporting girl-mentors to build up leadership and life skills in order to support girls who are survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation. The two organisations make a powerful team with Gals Forum International (GAFI) leveraging their experience in economic empowerment for women and girls, while The Remnant Generation (TRG) brings their knowledge in working with survivors of sexual abuse and supporting adolescent girls through early pregnancy.



### MEET THE ADDOYYEE CLUSTER – ETHIOPIA!

During the power-mapping dialogues with girls in Oromia State, the 4 organisations that form

Adooyyee Cluster learned first-hand about the pervasive gender-based violence and sexual exploitation that girls face in their daily lives. A group of organisations came together to shift that reality by supporting girls to build confidence, to know and stand up for their rights, and to understand their bodies so they can make informed choices about their reproductive health, and ultimately form solidarity within a space where they are safe to be girls. The programme leverages creative methodologies based on the **Eshet Children and Youth Development Organisation's** origins in theatre and music and **De La Salle Community Development Organisation's** use of music, circus, and cultural dancing to open up difficult conversations and support spaces of healing. **Serk Sexual and Reproductive Health and Youth Development Association** draws on their competency in sexual reproductive health peer-leadership programming to build up the skills of mentors who will support girls in the creative spaces. **A Better Life for Women and Children Charity Organisation** integrates an economic empowerment component through peer-saving networks and business development programmes for girls in the initiative. Working together, the **Adooyyee Cluster** offers an innovative, holistic support model that no single organisation could have delivered alone.



### MEET THE DAR ES SALAAM CLUSTER – TANZANIA!

When a group of girls graduated from an empowerment programme run by Kiwohede, they recognised they would be more likely to succeed if they worked together than if they worked alone, so they developed a plan. Each girl mobilised girls in her community. Each group worked as a collective to increase their access to and control over resources, to build up their decision-making power, to strengthen their micro-enterprises and to save together. The groups are thriving, with 4 girl-led clusters: **Juhudi, Jitabuhe, Wa Dada wa Leo** and **Social Empowerment Group** that together, have a membership of 100 girls and are growing. Located in highly marginalised communities of Dar es Salaam, the girls are not just responding to their group needs, they are leveraging their voice and collective action to address violence against all girls in their communities.



### MEET THE KILIFI CLUSTER – KENYA!

**Safe community, New Visionary Arts Group** and **Pad a Dada** work towards improving the lives of adolescents in Mtwapa, one of the coastal region's fast-growing peri-urban towns in Kilifi District. The growth of the town has come with an increase in recreational centres and residential housing, resulting in higher rates of child marriage and commercial sexual exploitation of girls. **The Kilifi Cluster** collaborates on an initiative titled **My Voice Matters**, which builds adolescent girls' control over their bodies by developing a sound understanding of their bodies, building skills to analyse how gender and power affect them, and gaining the confidence to make decisions for their own lives and to speak up for themselves. **Pad a Dada** provides girls with menstrual kits, so that they are not forced to extract value from their bodies in order to address basic needs. **New Visioners Arts Group** uses the arts to engage girls on the dangers of drugs and how they increase their vulnerability to abuse. **Safe Community Youth Initiative** facilitates the engagement and participation of adolescents and young people in policy development and implementation so that they have a voice and can influence the decisions that shape their communities and their lives.

## STRATEGY

### TALK TO GIRLS ABOUT POWER – POWER-MAPPING TOOLS

In order to foster a genuine transformation, all that we do, say, learn and teach must be deeply rooted in the realities of girls' lived experience. Through a series of guided exercises and tools, CRVPP's partners were supported to engage in deep dialogue with girls about the contours of power in their lives. Although all the organisations were already working with girls, almost none had devoted the time and space to be with girls and to think with girls in this way.

Partners reviewed tools as a cluster and held listening sessions together. Their teams also worked together to make sense of what they heard. At each stage of the process, we prompted the clusters to reflect on what they did, what they heard, what they learned, and how it was shifting their understanding of girls' lives and needs.

### RESOURCE COLLABORATION, PLANNING AND LISTENING – THE LEARNING GRANT

CRVP was committed to supporting partners to listen and learn from girls before they started project planning, writing grant proposals or costing initiatives. They wanted groups to have the space to hear and make sense of what girls were telling them, without being constrained by business-as-usual frameworks. Six-month learning grants provided proper resources (and thus space and time) to fully engage with girls, their hopes, dreams and lived realities – a fundamental precursor to transformational change in programmatic practice. The process was more than just a listening exercise. It provided partners with tools to understand how girls experienced power and how they express power

### ACCOMPANY THE PROCESS – NATIONAL CONSULTANTS

Working across several countries, CRVPP developed the role of National Consultants to provide local support to partners in each country. Over time, the consultants' knowledge of context, language, and local networks became invaluable. They served as critical friends and thought partners through the sense-making process, prompting partners by asking questions, providing feedback, and pointing to opportunities for deeper analysis.

### COLLECTIVE ANALYSIS – FINDING MEANING

Listening to girls talk about their lived experience surfaces rich stories and valuable information. Some of the girls started off a little shy, but when space was held with respect for their voices, they grew comfortable telling their stories. It was astounding, and illuminating, how much they had to share. An important next step in the process was finding patterns across the breadth of individual stories to draw out a higher order of meaning and implications to guide subsequent programming. Partners worked together in clusters to analyse stories, share insights, unlock moments, and draw towards a series of conclusions. Together, national consultants and project leads then facilitated a series of online workshops from each cluster to inform meta-analysis across all four countries.

## MORE ON THE POWER-MAPPING TOOLS

From the earliest stages of life into adulthood, boys and girls experience differences in how they are treated, what expectations their families have of them, and what opportunities and resources they can access. This difference begins before birth, intensifies in adolescence and results in very different adult life trajectories. Just as boys are given more freedom and opportunity, the lives of girls become more constrained and confined. As a result, adolescent girls often live out their lives without the opportunity to exercise their rights and freedoms, or to reach their full potential. They have little control or influence over who they marry, how many children to have, and if they can work outside the home. Even when they do work, they struggle to have full control of the resources they earn.

Programmes designed to change this trajectory often focus on all the tangible and visible things that can be done, leaving out the critical but less obvious ways in which girls are marginalised. For example, one theory of change is that we can transform girls' lives by supporting them to access education, and that through skills development and qualifications, they will be able to access job markets and improve daily life for themselves and their families. Whilst the value of education should not be understated, it is only one part of a much larger picture about what girls need. The fact that girls are not permitted to attend school is a symptom of a much broader set of issues related to the control of girls' lives and freedoms. In order to fundamentally change the harmful status quo, we need to start by understanding the precise ways in which power inequalities play out in girls' everyday lives.

Dr. Sahni, the founder of Digital Study Hall in India, explains in her book, *Reaching for the Sky*; "Only when girls understand the structural cause of their oppression, see themselves as equals who have choice and agency, and can claim their right to develop the capabilities and skills to exercise that choice and agency, can they exercise their power in order to overcome their subordination and marginalisation."<sup>41</sup>

Although we often don't talk about it, the way that power is exercised in everyday social interactions has as much impact in life's outcomes as the power that is exercised in the highest levels of political and economic institutions.

The Power-Mapping Tools contain a series of activities to support partners to understand how power is playing out in the everyday lives of the girls they seek to serve. This is only an initial step in a much longer process to help practitioners integrate girls' experiences of power into their everyday programmes and practices. Through each of these exercises, partners have the chance to explore and identify the who, what, and how of power in the ordinary lives of girls. Rather than offering answers, the Power-Mapping Tools provide a way to look at the reality of girls' lives and begin the conversation of exploring how we might build up our power to create a different reality.

The first exercise is one that can be used directly by organisations to get them to begin to think about power in everyday life. The remainder of the exercises can be used by grassroots partners as a way to begin to engage girls. At the end of each section is an analysis framework to help organisations capture and make sense of what they hear.



[Click here to access the five power-building activities used by national consultants and community organisations to open up conversations about power with adolescent girls.](#)

### Systems that are meant to uphold girls' rights systematically fail



When my parents died, I had to take care of my siblings. It could have been fine, but my uncle decided to fight for the inheritance of my parents' property. Because I am a girl, no one would support me.



It is often difficult to regain my sense of confidence and feel that my body is mine when I tell someone that a man is touching me or raping me, and they do not believe me or do anything. I feel hopeless, like my body is not mine.

### Girls are shut out from opportunities, services, and assets



One of the girls was taken from her village to town. Her relative said that she was taking her to school, but instead, she did not put her in school, she just made her work as a domestic worker and did not pay her.

### The lives of adolescent girls are characterised by control



I felt powerless when I was forced to get married to an old man I hate. He does not allow me to do business any longer.

### Violence permeates every sphere of girls' lives



The boda boda driver touched my butt, saying he couldn't believe that it was so big. I felt embarrassed and powerless over my body.



Her sister-in-law burned her with hot water because she came home late from school.

### Girls are forced to extract value from their bodies



You know some of our parents are engaging in prostitution. They bring clients and force us to engage with the same clients otherwise we will not get school fees. They say, this is how to survive.

### Girls will always find ways to resist



Initially, my father and mother chose an early marriage for me. I expressed that I was not ready and not willing to marry the person that was supposed to marry me. When I realised my parents would not listen to me, I left the area for a while. I went to Addis Ababa and worked as a domestic helper while also going to school. After a year and a half, I visited them, and they agreed on a plan to let me finish school and get married at the right time.



Confidence is knowing ourselves. It is knowing what I can do and what I am good at. Some girls do not know what they can and cannot do.

### FACILITATED DESIGN WORKSHOP – TRANSLATING MEANING INTO ACTION

While the listening, sense-making, and analysis were all important steps in the journey, the real added value for practitioners in local organisations was how they used the information. It was essential for partners to hear girls in order to root their work in girls' lived experience. The transformative step was then taking what they heard from girls and using it to inform and evolve programme design.

Partners from all four countries gathered for a five-day learning workshop in a quiet setting on the shores of Lake Naivasha in Kenya. They created a space for thinking, sharing, learning, and connecting. This gave partners the chance to reflect on both the process of listening and the themes emerging from girls' narratives. As they dove deeper into case studies, partners explored, often for the first time, what a transformative programme, informed by girls' voices and lived experience, might look like. By giving each cluster space to connect, question, reflect, and explore new ways of being in this work, both with girls and with each other, powerful new programming ideas bubbled quickly to the surface.



[Click here to access a series of programme design worksheets, case studies, and handouts that helped partners act on what they heard from girls.](#)



## From learning to action: How conversations about power are shifting programmatic practice

Again and again, in CRVPF's initiative, powerful evolutions in programme design emerged when partners used new tools and devoted adequate time to engage with girls in conversations about power. Listening to girls, making sense of their stories, understanding how their lives are defined by unequal power relationships all resulted in a noticeable shift in how the clusters shaped their programmes. Across all four countries, a more radical and rooted way of doing and being with girls began to emerge during the first year of the experiment. In this section, we lift up some of the early shifts in programmatic practice to provide a practical roadmap for organisations to adopt these strategies.

### BY AND FOR GIRLS

Each group of organisations working in a cluster submitted a joint proposal. Across all clusters, when partners are asked about the problem that they are solving, they consistently base their responses in the voices of girls, directly quoting what the girls said, rather than just stating their understanding of what the girls said. This is a foundational shift for organisations in this sector, who will often quote statistics that frame the national situation of girls, rather than how they have understood the problem from girls' lived reality.

**Girls are no longer just the subjects of the initiative, they are leading and designing programmes too.**

Even more notable in the partners' new programme evolution was the role that girls played in the design and implementation. Rather than design the content for safe spaces programming, the partners built in a period of time when they engaged girls and heard from them about what they wanted and needed to learn. Instead of the programme staff of clusters delivering life skills sessions, they invested in building up the skills of young women mentors who work directly with girls in their girl-only spaces.



### FROM INFORMATION TO CRITICAL ANALYSIS

**Programme staff no longer just want to teach girls things. They want girls to analyse the information they're given, and on that basis, make more informed choices.**

Many traditional programmes focus on information delivery by adult staff to girls, without understanding information as just the first point in a longer journey towards voice, choice, and power. A new understanding of the role of critical analysis in girls' programming is supporting partners to show up in their relationships with girls differently. Rather than simply delivering information or a traditional curriculum, they are using participatory and creative approaches to support girls to access information, as well as, to ask questions and then make choices based on what they know and what they want for themselves.



## IN PARTNERSHIP WITH GIRLS

In one new programme, instead of the organisation staff advocating for services for youth in the community, they facilitate round tables between girls and power-brokers where girls narrate what they need in their own voice, on their own terms.

Another powerful shift in the programme is the role that girls play in catalysing change. Traditional approaches fail to see girls as the subject of their own stories. In the programme design sessions, clusters began to flip the script. The listening sessions clearly had an impact, because they enabled the partners to see and hear girls, and to know that girls not only have something to say but are ready and capable of leading change. For example, in one new initiative focused on advocacy, programme staff wanted to let girls lead the work directly instead of staff serving as the intermediaries between girls and power-holders. To deliver on the concept, programme staff planned a series of dialogues where girls met with policymakers, journalists, and service providers to directly advocate for the services they needed and make concrete recommendations about how those services should be delivered. Instead of programme officers or community leaders speaking about the issues impacting girls, girls themselves talked about the challenges they faced and offered solutions. When COVID-19 broke out in their communities, it was these same girls, now confident in their ability to speak and be heard, who led campaigns to educate other girls on how to keep themselves safe in the pandemic. Most recently, girls have expressed the desire to connect with and learn from girls in other clusters.

## THE TRADITIONAL IS PUNCTUATED BY CREATIVITY

Partners are exploring traditional topics in new and unexpected ways.

The programming from the CRVPPF initiative is not all radical, with elements remaining of more traditional approaches. For example, in some of the safe spaces, topics covered included sexual reproductive health and rights, financial literacy, vocational training, and others that would be expected. What is notable across the different partners is that some of the topics are now addressed in new and unexpected ways.

One partner trains girls in Theatre For Development, which the girls then use to reach girls more widely in their community. This is powerful because it uses a participatory process centred in raising girls' political consciousness. Another partner refers to their girl-only space as a 'Sisterhood Inspirational Space'. The programmes offer a wide range of experiences that catalyse critical thinking and analysis, building knowledge and skills, playing, and dancing. A creative energy has emerged that pushes against the sanitised safe spaces model.

## SHIFTS IN APPROACHES TO MONITORING AND LEARNING

Partners held the line on what girls had told them, as they built out MEL frameworks.

In a follow-up workshop, the clusters from Kenya and Ethiopia had an opportunity to develop their monitoring frameworks and define their learning agenda. Although they worked with a team of facilitators rooted in the child protection framework, the partners firmly held the line on prioritising the voices and lived experience of the girls they engaged with during the listening grants. The monitoring frameworks and the indicators they selected, connected back to girls' voices. Indicators of change included statements such as; 'Girls have the confidence to say 'no,' 'Girls will be safe', and 'Girls understand how to use sexual reproductive health information.' Change was captured and analysed through girls' stories. This was a profound change in a space where value is too often placed on that which can be easily seen or counted.

## FROM POWER ANALYSIS TO POLITICAL PRACTICE

Partners are increasingly recognising that their work is political.

Perhaps one of the most profound changes evident in the CRVPPF initiative is how partners have begun to use political analysis to inform their understanding of girls and the challenges they face. Partners also used this analysis in their relationships among each other and to CRVPPF – a significant step forward in an industry where the word *power* has all but been washed out of the commonly used term, *empowerment*. Partners continue to deepen their analysis of how power shapes the lives of the girls they serve. They are also building up their competency on how to use their programming to shift relationships of power in and between the girls in their programmes and the broader community. As their understanding deepens, so too does the success of the practice.



## Early lessons from a power-building experiment – Remarks from the Children’s Rights and Violence Prevention Fund

As CRVPF’s Executive Director, I have had a unique vantage point to see how our experiment in power-building with girls has unfolded across four countries. The work remains new and evolving, but some early lessons have emerged that I believe can help both funders and practitioners use the lens of power-building to protect girls from violence and support them to build lives of dignity, meaning and hope.

Throughout this experiment, the focus was on getting resources squarely into the hands of girls and their allies at the community level. We learned from both our successes and our setbacks. Change is never easy, and both CRVPF and the organisations we funded, had to take a searching look at how they operated and the narratives about girls that informed their approaches. I am most proud of the collaborative spirit that animated all our collective work, allowing us to keep a singular focus on what really mattered – the girls themselves.

I hope the following nine lessons prove useful to those all over the world who believe in the potential of girls.

### LESSON 1: GET TO KNOW THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

An existing ecosystem of local and regional actors is already at work with girls, no matter where you are geographically. CRVPF’s first step was to engage with these activists and practitioners to understand what’s working, where the gaps are and what challenges girls and their allies face. Listening to their wisdom, and staying connected to them throughout the initiative, enabled us to connect theory to practice and make smarter funding decisions. Engaging with the ecosystem helped us answer the big theoretical questions, like the tension between adolescent girls as, simultaneously, vulnerable, and powerful. But we also gained practical knowledge, such as how to engage with elders, faith communities and local government, all of whom can be potential allies or obstacles in building girls’ power.

### LESSON 2: LET GIRLS SPEAK AND BE HEARD

At the onset of the project, most of the organisations that CRVPF engaged with had never heard directly from girls. Creating the opportunity and the tools to deeply listen to girls and those around them, allows for a new kind of perspective that can only come when those with lived experience speak and are heard. We deliberately build in the time, space, and tools so organisations can get really good at listening to girls. These quotes below from practitioners, tell the story of what happens when we let girls speak and act upon what we hear:

‘When we listened to girls, we learned that girls know exactly what they want, and they know what to do. It is only that they do not have the means or the resources to do it. We no longer do business-as-usual, like planning for them, because we just see them as vulnerable girls. We now involve them in planning, in making choices, and in shaping all activities.’

‘Listening to girls revealed a lot about how community leaders and parents treat and see girls. This has really impacted our programming. For example, we now have a parent-child dialogue where girls have the platform to speak. This was something unheard of.’

‘In a conversation with girls who were formerly in commercial sexual exploitation, one of the girls told us that giving them start-up capital without building their ability for financial management does not help. They would end up back in commercial sex work if they didn’t have all the skills they need. This made us realise the gaps in our programme.’

### LESSON 3: KEEP LEARNING FROM START TO FINISH

Because building girls’ power is largely uncharted territory, it is essential to build learning into the initiative throughout its lifecycle. CRVPF and our partners, included space for learning at the very start of the project, which helped to set the groundwork for the journey ahead. Because many of the organisations had not previously worked with adolescent girls, our grant agreements included significant time and funding to enable partners to listen to and learn from girls before they developed their programming. As a funder, we wanted to learn together with our implementing partners, but also let them lead and guide the process to avoid a top-down dynamic that inevitably leaves partners scrambling to align with a funder’s point-of-view and preferences.

Despite our best intentions, CRVPF had difficulty continuing the learning process through the life of the initiative. We identified learning as a priority, developed learning questions and learning issues, but never fully operationalised it. We included space at the beginning of the journey for organisations to orient their work, but not enough later in the process to capture the rich potential learnings emerging from the work. I strongly recommend that funders ensure there is space and resources to do this ongoing systematic learning, to come up with questions, collect and analyse data, and be intentional about learning throughout an initiative. Funders should consider bringing on consultants to support learning work to reduce the burden on grassroots organisations. As donors, it’s critical to invest in this kind of learning, to share learning and to help support change, from grassroots to the global arena.

### LESSON 4: CONNECT UNLIKELY ALLIES

Because adolescent girls are often left out of children, youth, and women’s spaces, CRVPF saw a powerful opportunity to bring together people who do not otherwise work together but have shared interests and expertise.

The listening process we built in, brought organisations together in the same room to listen to girls directly, often for the first time. Having the shared experience of hearing girls describe their needs and strategies for survival and coping, provided a powerful baseline for connection and allowed these unlikely allies to go deeper in exploring their different and shared entry points to the work.

*'Even though we are neighbours, before we started working as a cluster, we did not have a real appreciation of each other's work or what competencies we each bring. But since we became a cluster, we know that CGC has strong relationships with the government. If we need government support, we know they can get all levels of government to the table or to any event. JMLC has a strong case management system. We now refer cases to them for effective management. They are also strong in planning field work. TC and NCC have proven to be great mobilisers. Our collective strengths really became helpful when we worked together in our baseline. The process went so well, even though individually we had struggled to do this in the past.'*

— LUWERO CLUSTER, UGANDA.

## LESSON 5: BUILD RELATIONSHIPS SO GRANTEES BECOME TRUE PARTNERS

Most of the partners CRVPF worked with were small NGOs and grassroots groups with limited capacity. We knew they would need help to absorb the funding and find new ways to work with girls. We also wanted to change our own mindset and move from a language of *grantees* to one of *partners*. We engaged two consultants, with deep expertise in working with girls, to assess the capacity of partners and help us understand what each group needed to thrive. This process helped us to understand our partners, most of which were led by young people and women. In turn, the consultants helped these leaders to understand what an institution means, what structure entails, and in general to spark a curiosity about building stronger organisations. All this work helped us as a funder, understand our grantees and how we can better support them, and over time, evolve the relationship from a top-down vision of funder and grantee to a collaboration between true partners.

## LESSON 6: BE FLEXIBLE AND READY FOR THE UNEXPECTED

In every context, external factors will arise that threaten to delay or derail even the best-planned projects. Funders need to allow for flexibility so partners can respond to their lived realities. CRVPF received a harsh reminder of this reality in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic struck just a few months after partners had received their first implementation grants. The trust and strong communication channels we built with partners, enabled us to adapt and pivot relatively quickly. This flexibility gave partners the latitude to understand the impact of COVID-19 on girls and to use resources to meet the most critical needs.

## LESSON 7: BAKE IN COLLABORATION FROM THE START

When CRVPF launched the initiative, we asked organisations to apply for funding separately. But then early on, we saw the opportunity to group organisations in clusters to help build stronger networks and new alliances. This meant another step for organisations, building out how they would work together and revising their strategies and work plans. A lesson from this experience was to ask partners to apply together at initiative outset, creating space for them to develop a joint proposal and to not have to do this retrospectively. Since this initial experiment, CRVPF has revised our approach to include joint applications, which has reduced burden and time on partners and led to stronger, more holistic solutions.

## LESSON 8: GET REAL ABOUT DEVELOPING CAPACITY

If funders really want to develop the capacity of partners, they need to put a careful structure in place, backed by adequate funding, to help partners become stronger, more sustainable organisations. This is especially critical with smaller, grassroots organisations working with girls. I have seen many good organisations collapse when a funder leaves, because so much has been invested in the programme but not the organisational structure or leadership. CRVPF sought to mitigate this risk by asking grantees from the outset, what kind of structure, systems, and practical support they needed to do their work well through the duration of the initiative. We then helped them identify where they could get this support and build it into their budgets and plans.

Fassil Marriam

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## ENDNOTES

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