Girls and Young Feminists

Sparking, leading and organising across social movements

Girls' Power Learning Institute

Initiative powered by Our Collective Practice | Building narrative, knowledge, and power with and for girls.

Girls And Young Feminists: Sparking, Leading, and Organising Across Social Movements

Developed in 2024 with the foundational collection and analysis provided by the Stories of Girls' Resistance
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Girls Power Learning Institute – an initiative by Our Collective Practice

Girls' Power Learning Institute

Building Girls Power Institute Learning Booklets

The Girls' Power Learning Institute learning booklets and shared language glossary are key resources designed to support individuals, institutions, and networks across movements and sectors to transform their strategies and practices to better resource and support girls. The following booklets and resources are currently available through the Institute:

Shared Language Centring Girls and Girlhood
A glossary that provides a shared understanding of terms and concepts through a framing that centres girls' power, wisdom, and experience.

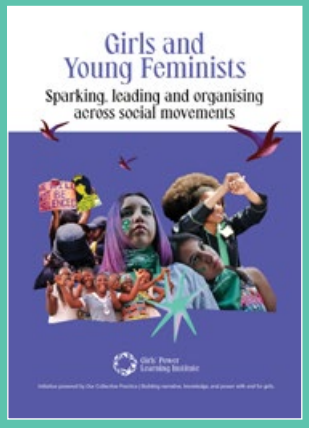
Girls and Girlhood: Resisting, Building, and Dreaming New Worlds (Booklet 1)
A deep dive into the why, what, and how of girls' resistance, dreaming, and power. This booklet includes examples of building power, how girls and young feminists are organising, and some of the factors girls and young feminists contend with in their work and organising.

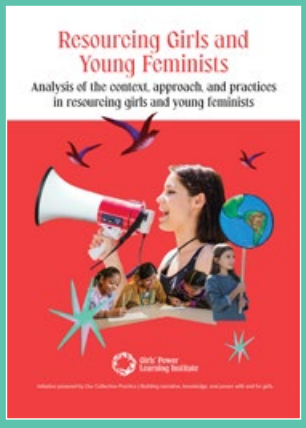
Girls and Young Feminists: Sparking, Leading, and Organising Across Social Movements (Booklet 2)
Sheds light on some of the contributions girls and young feminists have made to social change by documenting case studies of specific movements and highlighting where girls and young feminists have played a key role in making specific advancements. This booklet also highlights the specific roles, strategies, and impact of girls and young feminists in dismantling oppressive structures to bring about systemic change.

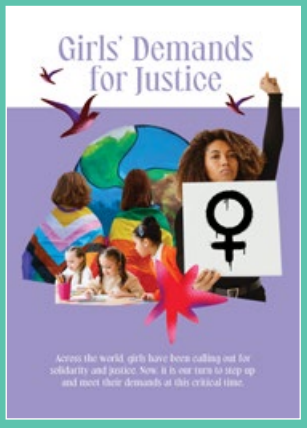
Resourcing Girls and Young Feminists: Analysis of the Context, Approaches, and Practices (Booklet 3)
Provides an understanding of philanthropy and the current state of funding for girls and young feminists, while highlighting key recommendations and best practices for effectively resourcing them. This booklet moves from understanding the contributions of girls and young feminists in social change to providing more and better resources to their efforts.

The Systemic Change Analysis Framework
A tool for understanding systemic change through a power analysis, including an analysis of whose agency, dreams, ideas, needs, voices, leadership, and demands must be centred in relation to the desired change. Systemic change analysis framework

For more information and to access more upcoming tools and resources, please visit: ourcollectivepractice.org/girlspowerinstitute







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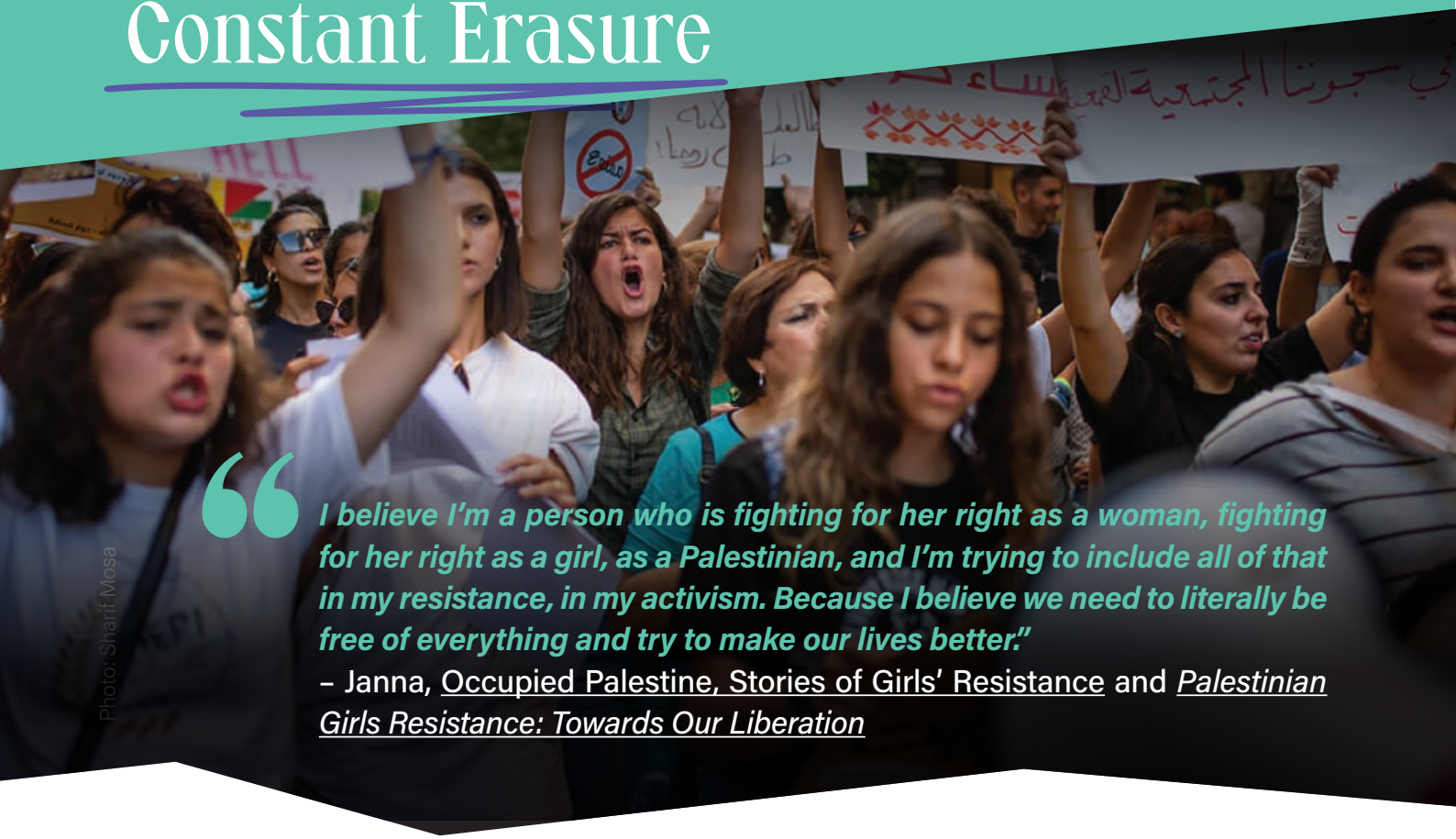


Photo: Sharif Mosa

> ***I believe I'm a person who is fighting for her right as a woman, fighting for her right as a girl, as a Palestinian, and I'm trying to include all of that in my resistance, in my activism. Because I believe we need to literally be free of everything and try to make our lives better."***
> – Janna, Occupied Palestine, Stories of Girls' Resistance and *Palestinian Girls Resistance: Towards Our Liberation*

To be a girl is to resist, to reclaim, to dream, and to build better worlds for themselves, their families, their communities, and the world. Through their creative power, courage, and energy, **girls** and **young feminists** are, and always have been, transforming policies and systems, responding to emergencies, leading social movements, and sparking change across the world.

A glance through history books and today's headlines unveils the powerful presence of girls and young feminist activists, leaders, culture shapers, and change-makers—woven across movements and generations. From the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in the United States to today's Black Lives Matter movement, from the anti-apartheid struggle of the 1980s to South Africa's #feesmustfall movement of 2015, and from Mexico's anti-femicide movement of the 1990s to the Ola Verde (Green Wave) and feminist movements sweeping Latin America today, their impact is undeniable and enduring.

Girls and young feminists continue to spark movements across the globe. For instance, they are courageously protesting the death of Mahsa Amini in Iran, demanding accountability and change with deep political and strategic clarity. They are driving movements to end femicide, evident in the recent waves of activism in Mexico and Kenya, and defying strict laws under the Taliban in Afghanistan by attending secret schools.

> ***While girls are not the only people resisting systems of oppression and organising towards a more just world, their belief in freedom and a better world, as well as their unwavering courage to fight against all odds, is unique to this moment in their lives."*** – Stories of Girls' Resistance

Girls and young feminists can be found on the frontlines of every movement today and throughout history and yet their power and contributions are consistently invisibilized, co-opted, overlooked, and undervalued. **Take a moment to reflect on news headlines, historical articles, museums, and more—do you remember seeing, learning, or hearing about the stories and contributions of girls and young feminists in advancing social change? Did you learn about girls and young feminist leaders in history classes, or women for that matter? Where have you seen their experiences represented? Where have you seen their stories told from their own voices and not as an anecdote or footnote by someone else?**

> *"We live in a society where it's wrong to have a young girl who, in addition to going to school, talks about sexuality issues, go to meetings, train others, be an active member of an organisation, and appear on TV and the radio. But I was passionate about all that, and it was my duty."* – Adam, Mali, Stories of Girls' Resistance

The conventional wisdom of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa is that it was a movement that primarily involved young men. It is only through research conducted in the 2010s that this was challenged, by documenting and amplifying the key roles that girls and young women played in the movement. Similarly, the role of girls and young women is often erased from the Civil Rights Movement in the United States; fifteen-year-old Civil Rights activist Claudette Colvin is not in most history books, despite bravely refusing to give up her seat on a bus a few months before Rosa Parks, because teenagers were seen as unreliable in courts. The stories and histories we share hold profound significance. They are the threads that weave our shared experiences, shaping our understanding of the world—past, present, and future. Stories form the backbone of our collective narratives and lay the foundation for our movements. Like power, they must be reclaimed and documented from our lived experiences; otherwise, they risk being told and shaped by others. Reclaiming these stories strengthens our efforts to influence decision-making, shape policy formation, and define funding strategies—challenging the exclusion and misrepresentation that often dominate these spaces.

> *"We live these two great forms of violence, marked by the patriarchal and the adult-centric [reality], that create a permanent underestimation: that is, you are a woman and you are already inferior, but if you are a woman and you are a teenager or a little girl you are even more inferior because 'you do not know anything,' then it is like resisting all of that and facing it."* – Milagros, Argentina, Stories of Girls' Resistance

Tracking Our Accountability to Girls and Young Feminists

Being grouped under—or worse yet, entirely excluded from—the umbrella of "women" means the nuances of girls' age-specific experiences of gender are not considered, and being grouped under the umbrella of "youth" or "children" means the nuances of their gendered experiences of age are overlooked. Such approaches are common and overlook the importance of an intersectional framework that considers the way in which age and gender (among other identities) come together to shape people's experiences. As a result, girls and young feminists who are actively working to challenge oppression and carve out better worlds for themselves and us all struggle to get recognition and access to sufficient resources with which to sustain and grow their work.

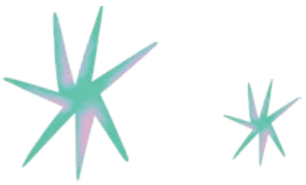
Thus, the marginalisation that girls and young feminists experience within society is replicated within funding spaces, resulting in additional pressure and precarity.

This extends to how funders track their grantmaking data. Adolescent girls are not counted as a unique population in most coding or data tracking, which is not commonly disaggregated by age, gender, and other factors. This lack of clear and consistent data tracking makes it difficult to understand the funding landscape and to hold funders accountable in how they fund girls and young feminists. Requiring funders to code and track their grantmaking data, with an intersectional analysis, promotes deeper accountability across philanthropy.

> *Within movements and across sectors, girls' insights, strategies, and leadership are systematically undermined, not just by being erased from historical narratives, but by being infantilized in present-day movements. Girls are often treated as mere beneficiaries of activism rather than the thinkers and organizers behind transformational shifts. This reflects a broader patriarchal and ageist refusal to acknowledge the political intelligence and radical imagination that girls and young feminists bring to the forefront. To strengthen movements, we must dismantle the patronizing notion that girls are too young or too inexperienced to lead, strategize, and theorize. Girls are actively creating new languages of resistance, new tactics of disruption, and new blueprints for systemic change. Their experiences are not auxiliary to movements and social change efforts— they are the pulse of global struggles for justice. The deliberate sidelining of their intellectual labor is a political act that serves to maintain existing power structures by denying them the recognition, platform, and resources they need to sustain their movements."* – Priyanka Samy, India, Dalit Feminist Activist

> *In addition to directly funding girls and young feminists, we must allocate funding to counteract the invisibilisation of girls and young feminists in movements and reveal their role in catalysing change—by resourcing learning, research, and documentation."* – Boikanyo Modungwa, Feminist MEL Expert, Botswana

Girls and Young Feminists: Sparking, Leading, and Organising Social Movements sheds light on some of the contributions girls and young feminists have made to social change around the world by documenting case studies of specific movements and highlighting where girls and young feminists have played a key role in making specific advancements, or in other words, movement "wins." This effort is part of a learning series focused on girls and young feminists, bridging the theories, narratives, and strategies with practices that have the potential to transform programs and systems. Resourcing *Girls and Young Feminists: Analysis of the Context, Approach, and Practices in Resourcing Girls and Young Feminists* moves us from understanding the contributions of girls and young feminists in social change to providing more and better resources to their efforts.



Writing and Reflection Questions:

- **Consider the movements you've studied or been exposed to, what stories have you been told?** Who has been involved in this movement? Who has been considered the movement leaders? Who has received resources for their work and labour in this movement? Can you name any girls or young feminists who were a part of this movement?
  - If it is hard to think of girls and young feminists, what does that tell you about the stories shared, whose voices are being amplified, and what has been documented?
  - If you were able to think of girls and young feminists, where and from whom did you learn of these stories? Are these stories reflected in dominant media, public discourse, and popular culture?
- **Reflect on the stories and narratives you have heard about girls as it relates to social change.** Can you think of a story that does not single out one girl as a heroine but contextualizes her within a movement and community? Write a few sentences about what you know about her story.
- **Reflect on your own reaction to the idea of girls playing a strategic and critical role in movements, their role in leading, sparking, and participating in movements.** Do you notice any biases that come up for you? Don't judge yourself if you do, just notice them and consider where this bias might come from.

Understanding Movements: What Makes a Social Movement?

> ***A movement is a set of people with a shared interest or experience of injustice, who join together/become organized to build their collective power, and create a shared agenda for change which they pursue through collective action, with some continuity over time. The best way to eradicate inequality and injustice is when oppressed people build strong movements that shift the structures of power."***
> –Srilatha Batwilala, All About Movements[1]

Photo: Adolfo Vladimir

> *It is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism."* – Angela Davis, Freedom Is a Constant Struggle

Social movements, referred to also as **social justice movements**, are made of collective or complementary work that aims to challenge the current status quo and create a particular change in society including systemic, structural, policy, and cultural change. Movements exert pressure and drive societal change—they include actions big and small, and are sustained through a focus on the collective as opposed to the individual. In order for movements to thrive, people need to work together and acknowledge their interconnectedness, especially in the face of oppression and all its manifestations, while also remaining hopeful and imagining better worlds.

> *After my accident left me bedridden and with a disability, I was so down. I thought my life was over. Then one day there was a turning point. I was at home watching TV, not wanting to go out, and then I saw on TV that Fiji was welcoming back Iliesa Delana, Fiji's first paralympian who won a gold medal, with a street parade. People were cheering because he had done the country proud. I had never seen anything like it. Then I also saw a group of people with banners saying disability rights matter on the streets. I was taken aback. I never knew groups like that existed. Groups which had people like me. So I decided to find them, and now I work with them. I do my advocacy with them. I know my purpose."* – Jay, Fiji, Stories of Girls' Resistance

1. Some of the content in this section is adapted from All About Movements by Srilatha Batwilala. For a more comprehensive overview of what a movement is, why do movements — and feminist movements — matter, how do we build movements, and the stages of movements we encourage you to read All About Movements in full.

When I talk about the resources in Western Sahara and why we are against, for example, that our resources are being exported to be used by others, I always also give an example of the Amazon, because this is also happening in other places in the world. When I talk about, for example, weapons and how they are sold to be used in Western Sahara, I talk about the ones that are sold in Yemen. Who said it? Mandela? No one is free until we all are, or something like that. For me everything is related." – Asria, Western Sahara, Stories of Girls' Resistance

A person needs a sense of belonging to a group and a community so they can carry on with their autonomy and continue to nourish and evolve as a people. That's when I started to think that I needed to talk about this and I needed to be part of a larger group that maintains a historical conscience about the status of resistance. Because everything that I started doing when I was a girl under resistance was in reaction to a specific action. And then I learned when I grew up that for my resistance to be maintained and sustained it needs to fit into a frame where a collective resistance and a collective memory and a collective narrative come all together to fight extremism of colonial oppression and patriarchy." – Sandie, occupied Palestine, Stories of Girls' Resistance, and Palestinian Girls Resistance: Towards Our Liberation

Despite—or perhaps because of—the immense challenges girls face, a common feature of their activism is the way they engage in the radical practice of imagining the world not how it is, but how it might be. And they bring this imagination back to bear on the present, in the ways they learn, play, organise, invent, and care for themselves and each other. Indeed, it is likely her imagination that will lead us all to liberation." – A Roadmap to Revolution, Stories of Girls' Resistance

Movements are inherently generative, offering radical alternatives to the systems they seek to dismantle. They are not solely about opposition but about creation—creating new ways of organizing society, redistributing resources, and redefining power that are collective, participatory, and accountable to the most marginalized. This requires rejecting the co-optation of movement language by institutions that only perform solidarity and instead grounding our movements in transformative, intersectional practices that center the lived experiences of those most affected by oppression. True feminist systems change means moving beyond critique to the construction of a world where equity is not an aspiration but a lived reality, and where the power to decide, shape, and lead is in the hands of those historically excluded. This vision rejects incremental change and seeks the radical restructuring of economic, social, and political systems to align with feminist principles of autonomy, care, and justice."
– Priyanka Samy, India, Dalit Feminist Activist

Movements are inherently political, intricately linked to power dynamics and the challenging of entrenched power structures. That is, which individuals or groups influence decision-making, set agendas, and control resource distribution. Movements expose the ways in which, through power hoarding, systemic injustices arise. They work to highlight inequalities and create deep changes within our socio-political landscapes. Movements are not only about resisting existing oppressive structures of power but also radically reimagining and building new systems rooted in solidarity, justice, belonging, equity, and care.

Movements take many forms across time and context—visibly protesting in the streets, frontline response efforts organized in kitchens, quiet negotiations in back rooms, ongoing work of base-building through political education, increasing and strengthening movements, building new analysis, and working to hold the line on hard won victories.

Sometimes an event can spark mass organizing and rapidly increase a movement's base. For example, in 2017 when Harvey Weinstein was accused of multiple sexual assaults in the US, the #MeToo movement in the United States and globally went viral, prompting millions of women and girls to share their stories and join the movement. Similarly, the launch of the Black Tuesday movement in 2020 was sparked after the report of a brutal rape of a four-year old girl in Sierra Leone. What began with a simple request to wear black in solidarity and protest with rape survivors grew into a campaign that educates communities about safeguarding girls. Both of these are examples of a movement moment in decades-long grassroots efforts to end violence against girls and women.

Actions don't always have to be loud or widely visible, sometimes it is the whisper of "me too" from one girl to another; or girls pooling their resources to support each other to respond to an emergency and/or to work towards their financial security; or a group of pregnant girls refusing to stay home when banned from school, collectively showing up and taking up space where they are told they don't belong. Sometimes seemingly small actions turn into big national or international actions or movements, and other times they stay rooted in their community. What connects movements, and all these examples, is that they are committed to shifting power, changing power structures, and reimagining and building new systems that affirm life.

> *People think of movements on a grand scale—a march in the streets … A movement is something that makes changes. It doesn't have to start with a thousand people, it often starts with a couple of signatures."* – Dominique, Turtle Island (United States of America), Stories of Girls' Resistance

> *We often think of movement actions as confrontative—the images that come to mind when we hear the word 'movement' are marches, protests, and rallies. But in fact, movements also engage their target groups in other ways, such as through advocacy, social media campaigns, public education, and so on. Interestingly, movements sometimes target their own communities in the change process. Many women's movements, for instance, focus on changing attitudes of men and boys within their own families or communities, and this is where their collective action often begins.*
>
> *Because movements are addressing deep-rooted injustices, they know change will take time, and that the movement has to have a longer-time span to achieve its goals. So, movements are not just a spontaneous uprising or short-term campaign or action, like a Women's Day march or a One Billion Rising gathering. However, spontaneous uprisings have often transformed into longer-term movements, such as the anti-monarchy protests in Nepal, the Narmada Bachao Andolan in India, or the movement against violence on women in Bangladesh triggered by acid attacks and sexual assaults on women."* – Srilatha Batwilala, All About Movements

Spark of Movements

Movements typically begin in three key ways, and sometimes through a combination of the following:[2]

1. **Through a spark that ignites outrage:** For example, #ShutItAllDown in Namibia was sparked after a 22-year-old woman was found dead as the result of femicide and ignited an online campaign that then turned to the streets to demand change, resulting in policy changes. Sometimes this looks like loud protests on the streets with signs and other times it's a subtle awakening, an awareness that shifts our understanding. For example, a girl coming to realise she is not being treated the same as her brother, or her male peer, and this sparks the action in her own life, sometimes inspiring others towards that change. Or a girl realising her experience of violence is not unique, but an experience so many girls in her community face, prompting her to organise other girls in her community to change hearts, minds, and policies.

> *I was young, I had lots of anger and energy. We were so angry, after a week of a sit-in protest in the centre of Kathmandu, we decided to go and protest in front of a restricted zone in 'Singadurbar' (the ministries) because we felt like the decision-makers and leaders were not listening to our sit-in protest. We decided to go in front of the main entrance of the ministries and make ourselves visible—and we did it. We had a confrontation with the security force. I was afraid but at the same time my anger gave me energy. Our protest was widely covered by national and international media."* – Dipa, Nepal, Stories of Girls' Resistance

> *There was an incident at the time, wherein former Minister of Health Volda Lawrence had labeled child rape allegations as "a family matter." I was in university when I heard this and it just made me very angry and I couldn't understand how could a sitting minister say something like this and not have anybody condemn her or anything? I looked into it and I came across Red Thread Women's Center; I sent them a message and they told me they were holding a protest on the same action the next day and that I should come out. I did and that was kind of my first protest action. After that, well it really was just the beginning."* – Akola, Guyana, Stories of Girls' Resistance

> *I was 10 or 12 years old. I can't really remember, but I can remember the first day that I was sexually harassed. The men just laughed and thought it was funny. And I felt like this is not right. It was a public street and I was walking with my friends back home. There were three people driving a motorcycle and a guy in the middle was a boy probably my age - he decided to grope me from my butt. And they were just laughing, and they didn't stop. They were just really laughing, and I just couldn't understand why that happened. And why the other men standing in the street didn't do anything about it. And why my friend was saying that I should probably get a new outfit for school. But I felt like this has to change, this has to change."* – Mahasin, Sudan, Stories of Girls' Resistance

2. Adapted from Srilatha Batwilala, All About Movements: Why Building Movements Creates Deeper Change, CREA, 2020.

2. **Through conscious, intentional movement-building processes where some individuals or an organization such as a women's organization, a group of young women, or a feminist collective decides to mobilize affected people around one or more injustices that affect them.** For example, Wote Sawa Young Domestic Workers' Organization in Tanzania was started by former child domestic workers, Angela Benedicto and Jenipher Nelson Kato. They started organizing with other domestic workers in their community and work to empower current and former child domestic workers to understand, safeguard, promote, and claim their rights in Tanzania through legal and economic empowerment; child abuse monitoring; psychosocial support; and advocacy for policy reforms in line with national and international child welfare standards.

> *As a girl who has experienced violence in my life, I realized if I continue to keep quiet, when I know that I have the power within, knowing that I have a voice to raise, to stand and fight for my colleagues, and also put a stop to how our community is seeing girls. We can do better and have a better future. But I also realized that I cannot do it alone and that I needed to call on people, on girls that have gone through the same violence as me. Because if we come together with the anger in us, if we come together, we can change the world for girls."* – Mariama, Feminist Activist, Sierra Leone

> *"... when I was 14 there was an NGO that came to school, they were working on women's issues but not a women's organisation, they were doing stuff on gender. It was the first time I heard that word. They said they were going to have a course on gender to explain what gender is. This was something that astonished me and explained a lot of stuff. I had the feeling I had been looking for that word my whole life. This is my world. Now the picture is complete. I had the desire to know more."* – Anna, Armenia, Stories of Girls' Resistance

> *When I was 15, I went to a diversity camp. That camp deeply impacted me. It was the first time I actually learnt the practical side of what my dad was saying. Some of the language—that's when I learned about white privilege—it became really practical and real. That diversity programme made me see it in more real and concrete terms. My dad was talking to me about a lot of things from a historical perspective, from an institutional angle. I'd say that the diversity camp helped me understand it in an interpersonal way that crystallised for me before. After I went to that week-long camp, I went back to school and I was fired up. You couldn't tell me anything. I was ridiculous ... we took VHS clips of movies that show low-key—well, now we call them microaggressions; hateful language that would graze over us. You wouldn't think about it. I streamed them all together into a little video and we showed it to all of the incoming freshmen and had discussion circles about it."* – Wakumi, United States, Stories of Girls' Resistance

3. **Through the networking of individuals and organizations working on a particular issue or change agenda.** For example, in 2013, a group of young moms in the United States began to find each other through blogging and online activism—united by a shared frustration about how the media, advocacy groups, and politicians across the political spectrum depicted their parenting as young people. Over a ten-year period, they grew their base of individuals and organizations across the country—and through their collective advocacy—changed the way public health experts and policymakers talk about teen pregnancy.

> *Solidarity to me is standing together and supporting one another in a particular situation or circumstance. It's very powerful and amazing to be part of a solidarity group. What binds us together is our values, principles, and commitments on a social issue, and of course our rage! I think it also comes with that rage and that anger that there's injustices in the world and you want to make things right; want people to have access to justice; you want people to have their voices, their struggles heard—you want to do something about it!"* – Mamta, Fiji, Stories of Girls' Resistance

> *Shortly after that, I decided to start my own initiative 'I Have a Right Foundation.' The goal of it really was to empower children, girls, and young people to know their rights; with the notion that if people know about their rights they are able to protect themselves from violence and abuse, and then do that in a creative way, in a way that ... just as we are taught maths and English in school, it needs to be more than just something on the sideline. Young girls should grow up knowing exactly their rights and knowing exactly how they should react in certain situations and what avenues there are. So for me, it was about not really focusing on the programmes that exist but creating opportunities and solving the issues in whatever small way that I could. That was I Have a Right."* – Valerie, Dominica, Stories of Girls' Resistance

A movement unites those directly affected by injustice because they are the people driving the struggle for change and who will benefit from transforming the system by shifting power. In fact, no system of injustice has ever been transformed by centering those who perpetuate harm or oppression. Rather, the resistance, power, vision, leadership, and dreams of those enduring harm and injustice is the only successful approach towards bringing transformational change.

> *In the context where power is so interpreted through a male centric lens, where we are not used to putting girls and power side by side, it becomes a radical, and dangerous, thing to do. For a girl to say, 'I have power, I know this power, I feel it within and I am using this power to collectivize with others to demand change.' Even that thought and the use of the word political power and claiming it—even that thought is deemed very radical for girls."*
> – Josephine, Sierra Leone, Feminist Activist

Movements are built by creating safe spaces where people can come together to learn and to unlearn, to think and speak new thoughts, and to plan and organise against current power structures towards changing their reality. Challenging the very power structures that marginalise people is often dangerous work, and it is not easy, or effective, to do it alone or in small isolated groups. It requires building community and collective power. **Collective power** arises out of solidarity or collective strength that comes from working towards a common or shared purpose. It arises from a sense of connection to others, often as a result of a shared experience or shared goals. It is the power to confront and challenge injustice by finding, mobilizing, and joining hands with others who face the same injustice, or care about the same cause.

> *Girlhood, it is not just a process that you go through, it's a community. It's something that you need to build. I am very blessed to find powerful females to have in my corner, have as support throughout my journey and I feel like that is important. I have to describe this, it's just a very important family to build. It's not just an experience. It's not me alone going through something, it's me and my sister is going through something together. Getting to do something together.* – Krystal, Jamaica, Stories of Girls' Resistance

Writing and Reflection Questions:

- **Think about an activist you know.** If you could think of a girl or young feminist activist in the last set of prompts, consider her experience again. What prompted their activism, what was their political context, who were they organising alongside?
- **Consider the movements you have been a part of or have read about.** How did they start? Was there an incident that sparked this or was it through ongoing political education and organising or through multiple pathways?
- **Reflecting on the statement: Challenging the very power structures that marginalise people is often dangerous work and requires building community and collective power.** What does that mean to you? Can you think of an example of when challenging power could be dangerous? Try not to think only of obvious grand gestures, but also of actions that might seem more subtle (i.e., wearing one's hair a particular way, showing up in a certain public or private space where one is unwelcomed, speaking up to someone with more power or authority). How might the radical nature of an action differ given someone's context, especially for girls and gender expansive young people? Write down thoughts that come up for you.

The Power and Impact of Social Movements

History demonstrates that movements are effective and are at the heart of all lasting social change efforts. Girls and young feminist activists helped fuel the movement to #EndSARS in Nigeria, which resulted in the dissolution of a law enforcement entity notorious for rape and rights abuses. When exploitation was eroding their cultural heritage and making them vulnerable to gender-based violence, Indigenous women across Guatemala united to successfully challenge the exploitation of their traditional weavings by major brands. Migrant farm workers in North America united with students and faith-based communities to compel major restaurant chains to buy food only from farms who ended the violence in their fields. Through the power of collective organizing, migrant workers were able to demand accountability and push for measures that ensure workplaces on farms are safe and free from abuse and violence.

A 2013 study analysed policies on violence against women across 70 countries from 1975 to 2005 and identified the primary drivers of policy change. Researchers concluded that feminist movements played the most crucial and consistent role in driving policy reform, surpassing the influence of left-wing parties, the number of women legislators, or national wealth. Further research and analysis, such as the analysis on the transformation that decolonial movements created across the world and recently published report on the power and promise of feminist movements, solidify this conclusion.

Depoliticisation: A Strategy Dismantle Movements' Power

Due to the influential role of movements in affecting change and reclaiming power, their language and efforts are frequently subjected to attacks, co-option, and manipulation aimed at disconnecting them from their original purpose and the goal of transforming the system. In essence, there is a concerted effort to ***depoliticise***. For instance, the co-optation or use of language about a social justice struggle without any commitment to the work or engaging with the work of the movement to which it is linked. This presents a façade of "neutrality" that undermines activists, resistance projects, and organising efforts deeply rooted in socio-political contexts.

Consider a politician who says they are committed to tackling climate change but does not use sustainable travel methods, or a company that posts on social media about supporting Black Lives Matter but does nothing to tackle racism amongst its employees. These examples show how the language of antiracism and climate justice can be disconnected from a movement and stripped of its power to call people to action and to hold the line.

Further, as a result of the scale of these processes of depoliticisation, there is a watering down of the meaning of certain demands and ideas that were conceptualised within movements—being antiracist becomes posting a quote on social media instead of critically reflecting on one's own positionality, privilege, and subconscious bias, educating ourselves on how racism works or challenging it when we see it. Being climate conscious means not merely saying we are, not actually utilising any sustainable practices, or challenging the industries that are responsible for climate crises, ecocide, and pollution.

Girls and young feminist are pushed to be "apolitical" that depoliticises and suppresses their power

> *We were in a meeting with the donors, the United Nations, and they were asking us—tell us what you want from us. We were so angry and I'm saying—we don't want your bags of food, even though we do need food, but we need political actions ... We are forgotten."* – Asria, Western Sahara, Stories of Girls' Resistance

This depoliticisation of girls and girls' work is pervasive in development, human rights, and social justice sectors. Too often girls are positioned as vulnerable subjects that are passively awaiting empowerment by the right intervention, often an intervention that is devised by a formal institution. The dominant stories of girls' leadership or activism that do exist centre the stories of individual girls that disconnect them from their social and political context. In these narratives, we see girls rise from being silenced to becoming heroes, transforming their communities, finding their voice, and living their dream—usually a dream closely allied with NGOs' development goals. This singular girl has found her inner-resolve, battled against, and overcome the odds; she is positioned as an extraordinary girl. And while girls can be extraordinary, such a myopic depiction of their leadership obscures the challenges girls face and the victories they achieve by removing them from the systemic nature of what they are facing and therefore the systemic nature required of the solutions to change their circumstances. This works to uphold and reinforce the status quo, instead of subverting it, by decentering power. These narratives isolate girls and young feminists from their community and the intergenerational groups of girls and women they are working alongside, learning from, and organising with.

The building of these narratives is intentional and systematic because most people in positions of power do not believe girls have, could have, or should have power—the idea of it is unfathomable to some because they see girls as passive victims or children without agency. For others, it instils fear of losing power because of the hope and change girls represent that fundamentally challenges existing power structures.

The impact of these narratives is consequential, driving funding strategies and programmatic approaches that do not address the role of power in girls' lives and work to uphold the status quo. Alternatively, **a politicised approach to girls leads to strategies and interventions that centre their power—building their power and supporting their collective power to dismantle power structures around them and demand for better in their families, communities, and the world. It leads to movement-building strategies where their power, resistance, and vision are centred**. By **building girls' power**, we acknowledge the power that girls hold within and find concrete and tangible ways to support girls to access and express their power and to build solidarity and collective power with each other. Building girls' and young feminists' **individual power** helps them understand that their experiences of oppression, the harm that they face, that their families and communities face is not unique to them, their families and or their communities;but is a common experience they share with others just like them—one that is connected to a bigger system of injustice. In building **collective power**, girls and young feminists find solidarity or collective strength and begin working towards a common or shared purpose, often one that confronts and challenges the injustice they face. They often find themselves mobilising and joining hands with others who face the same injustice, or care about the same cause.

Example of Depoliticisation in Discourse About Adolescent Pregnancy

It is estimated that approximately 21 million girls between the ages of 15 and 19 get pregnant in "developing" regions every year. Statistics like this are often presented alongside misleading assumptions or narratives. For example, the assumption or narrative that higher teenage pregnancy in "developing" regions is due to "cultural" differences rather than deeply rooted inequality across regions. This narrative depoliticises the cause of teenage pregnancy by overlooking how inequality informs people's experiences and decisions.

A politicised look at teenage pregnancy would critically consider the context. For example, if there is a lack of information and education on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and/or SRHR services are limited/underfunded, this will likely determine the outcome of people's behaviour around sex and pregnancy, not inherent cultural differences. An apolitical analysis of the problem will result in apolitical solutions that will not address the root of the problem: the unequal access to information and resources about sexual and reproductive health. A politicised approach would also consider the impacts of imperialism and colonialism in a context and how it has systematically oppressed girls due to the ways in which it has shaped gender and racial injustices. Understanding this, and the ways power operates in a context, would lead to solutions that build girls' individual and collective power to be able to negotiate, promote bodily autonomy, and fight for their collective rights and access to SRHR. It would centre their priorities, needs, and power in policy change, programming efforts and shifts in discourse and narratives about their lives.

> *A politicised approach to girls challenges the deep-seated global systems of capitalism, neoliberalism, and extractivism that thrive on the exploitation of marginalised communities, especially girls. Beyond dismantling power structures in their immediate environments, this approach should position girls as central actors in confronting the broader economic systems that commodify their labor, bodies, and futures. It calls for a radical redistribution of resources and power, where girls are not just participants but leaders in global movements for economic justice, climate justice, and the decolonization of development itself. By centering girls in this larger fight, we acknowledge that their liberation is inherently tied to dismantling these exploitative systems and building a world rooted in equity and justice for all.* – Priyanka Samy, India, Dalit Feminist Activist

Depolitisation and neutralisation distracts us from the real reason behind systemic global inequality and the relationships between such inequality and histories of colonisation and imperialism. They depoliticise contemporary inequalities, presenting them as matter of fact as opposed to deeply connected to oppression and legacies of colonisation. By using a political lens, movements seek to underscore these distractions, highlight the roots of certain narratives and whom they ultimately serve, and help us understand the ways in which power operates.

Resistance Is Not Romantic: The Complexity of Resistance and Movements for Girls and Young Feminists

As with any work, movements have the potential to replicate the inequalities that are present in society. One way in which this may happen is through the marginalisation of voices that encounter multiple forms of oppression. For example, in the late twentieth century, the Feminist movement centralised experiences white women had of gender inequality while excluding the experiences of Black women who faced both gender and racial inequality. This led to the coining of the term intersectionality, which advocates for the consideration of the ways in which multiple forms of oppression intersect and shape people's experiences. Although intersectional approaches to feminism have grown since then, certain groups still remain on the margins of the feminist movement. Examples can be found in the LGBTQI+ community who are often excluded from mainstream heteronormative notions of feminism, as well as in the experiences of girls and young feminists who, despite being active participants in the struggle for gender equality, are often excluded or overlooked because of their age.

All of the systems and structures that transpire against girls in the wider world are also at play in our social justice struggles. While many girls find critical and defining support from their communities, many also reflect on the extreme isolation they experience and how movement spaces are non-existent, inaccessible or even harmful in their contexts. The painful and contradictory reality is that many girls and young feminists face exclusion, ridicule, harassment, racism, homophobia, transphobia, adultism/ageism, and violence in the very spaces meant to be working towards a world that is more just. This is often happening in the context of repressive regimes and closing civic space that have a harsh and lasting impact on girls' and women's lived realities and very little resources to support their work. It is therefore important to not romanticise resistance, but to also address the entrenched inequities and hierarchies that exist within movements.

> *Movements must go beyond mere recognition of intersecting oppressions and actively dismantle the entrenched hierarchies within movements themselves. It's not enough to acknowledge marginalization—movements must radically redistribute power and leadership, placing those who bear the brunt of multiple forms of oppression—Dalit girls, Black girls, trans girls, Indigenous girls, at the forefront. These communities should not be tokenised or added as afterthoughts; they must be the driving force, shaping strategies, setting agendas, and leading the fight. Movements that fail to cede power and remain locked in traditional hierarchies are complicit in perpetuating the very systems of domination they claim to oppose. Inclusion is meaningless without a fundamental shift in who holds power. If we are committed to dismantling patriarchy, white supremacy, casteism, and all other systems of oppression, we must center the leadership and voices of the most marginalized; those who live at the sharpest intersections of violence and exclusion. Anything less is a betrayal of the radical transformation we seek.*
> – Priyanka Samy, India, Dalit Feminist Activist

Sustaining Movements and Celebrating the Work of Movement Wins

What does it take for a movement to be successful? What does it mean when we talk about a movement "win"? When thinking about the work of movements it is important to remain open to the different types of work that take place and make movements possible. There is work that takes place in the everyday, from administrative and logistical activities to informing someone new about the work we do, to facilitating awareness raising workshops or offering support to one's comrades. Equally, there is the work that takes place en masse—when people take to the streets and protest with particular demands, strategically boycott particular products to send a message, strike, or occupy and disrupt certain spaces.

When these actions lead to a positive outcome then that can be considered a movement "win"—the most obvious "wins" may be that the demands of a particular movement are met; for example through a change in policy, a new allocation of funding, or legal recognition or protections of a particular group or need. At the same time, we must not forget the smaller "wins" that occur in the everyday work of the movement; this may look like one more person learning about an injustice they were unaware of before, as well as access to the tools needed to tackle that injustice; it may be that those actively involved at the frontlines of the movement are able to gain access to the support (financial, psychosocial, health, etc.) so that they can continue with the work, or a well-known figure expressing support for the movement to raise awareness. Often, these efforts involve unseen labour—work that goes into both organising and advancing the cause—as well as the collective care that sustains this work, much of which is unpaid.

These smaller "wins" are equally important as they sustain movements and enable those involved to remain hopeful when their larger goals may take years to achieve. When thinking about movement "wins," we must remember the big, the small, and all of the seen and unseen work that is done to make sure progress is possible. We must also consider the labour and ongoing work of sustaining these wins; for example, policy change is often a huge win, but the policy is only as effective as its implementation. Long after a "win," movements play an ongoing role to ensure policies are upheld and that everyone has equal access to their legal rights. To achieve long-term change, movements must be resourced for a longer arch rather than one campaign or one policy change—from gaining change, to ensuring it's implemented, to sustaining it over time.

Photo: Adolfo Vladimir

How Girls Move: The Strategies and Tactics of Girls and Young Feminist Resistors[3]

"A powerful, yet often overlooked, dimension of girls' resistance is their capacity to create entirely new forms of organising that transcend traditional structures of power. Girls are not merely participants in pre-existing movements, they are architects of innovative, horizontal networks of resistance that challenge hierarchical, top-down approaches to activism. Their organising strategies are often rooted in solidarity, care, and communal strength, breaking away from the dominant, often patriarchal, frameworks of leadership. These approaches reflect a radical rethinking of power itself—one that prioritises collective well-being over individual heroism and that defies the very systems seeking to marginalise them." – Priyanka Samy, India, Dalit Feminist Activist

The role of girls in social movements is both transformative and indispensable. As catalysts for change, they bring unique perspectives shaped by their lived experiences at the intersection of age, gender, and other identities. Girls and young feminists are often among the first to recognize and respond to injustices; using their creativity, resilience, and collective power to challenge entrenched systems of oppression and advocate for equality, justice, and worlds that affirm all life. There is no singular way girls are organising and engaging in movements—and girls are constantly reimagining new ways of being and working collectively. There are, however, striking similarities in the tactics and principles underlying how girls organise, strategise, and make common cause with each other. These are perhaps unique to the moment girls enter this space—at a moment of awakening—before they are loaded up with all of our co-opted ways of naming, framing, and doing work.

3. Some of the content in this section is adapted from All About Movements by Srilatha Batwilala. For a more comprehensive overview of what a movement is, why do movements — and feminist movements — matter, how do we build movements, and the stages of movements we encourage you to read All About Movements in full.

1. **Bravery and determination:** Girls and young feminists demonstrate remarkable bravery and determination in their acts of resistance—qualities shaped by their age, life stage, and unique circumstances. Whether confronting an elder in their family or community, speaking out against an oppressive regime despite the risk of backlash, or putting their safety on the line, they are willing to take extraordinary risks in the pursuit of freedom.

2. **Radical imagination:** Despite—or perhaps because of—the immense challenges they encounter, girls' activism is often defined by their ability to envision the world not as it is, but as it could be. They channel this powerful imagination into the present through the ways they learn, play, organize, innovate, and care for themselves and one another. Despite facing systemic barriers, girls persist in their activism, offering hope and resilience to their movements. Their ability to envision and fight for a better future inspires broader communities to join their cause.

3. **Belief in freedom:** While girls and young feminists are not the only ones resisting systems of oppression and organising for a more just world, their unwavering belief in freedom and relentless courage to defy the odds sets them apart. They fight to live authentically without judgment or stereotypes, to embrace life fully—to learn, play, love, and lead, and the freedom to make mistakes. Above all else, a world that is free from violence, where all people can live in safety and dignity, and all belong. And beyond their vision for freedom lies a profound belief that the world can be transformed—and that they can play a role in shaping that transformation. It is the magic that lies between their belief, their imagination, and their brave and resilient strategies for change that results in girls and young feminists leading, sparking, and creating change.

4. **Solidarity:** Some of the most powerful girl-centred work fosters bonds grounded in communal ways of living and being, feminist principles of mutuality and reciprocity, and a shared belief that solidarity is the foundation of vibrant, thriving movements. Relationships not only ignite and sustain girls' resistance but also serve as a powerful strategy and tactic through which she resists. Whether forging connections through online spaces or strengthening relationships face-to-face, friendships lie at the heart of how girls and young feminists organise. Leveraging digital platforms, they connect across borders to share strategies, amplify each other's voices, and foster a sense of global solidarity. This interconnectedness strengthens movements and creates a shared vision for change. In a world that often isolates, blames, and makes girls feel they must hold the shame of their experiences, the deep solidarity and closeness found in these friendships subverts the harshness of their environments.

5. **Transformational leadership and organizing practices:** Girls and young feminists frequently lead with approaches that disrupt traditional hierarchies, favoring collaborative and horizontal decision-making. They reimagine leadership, centering inclusion, empathy, and community-driven solutions. Their activism and organising is diverse, adaptive, flexible, creative, and adjusting to the moment and needs. While they lead their work, they face increasing challenges—such as violence, censorship, criminalization, persecution, and harassment—as well as compounding crises. The way they organise and lead is deeply embedded in personal experience and local context, from decisions about whether to register as a formal organisation or collective or to stay unregistered, whether they opt for a more flat or decentralised rotating leadership structure or model a more traditional structure, based on what they've witnessed in their communities or how visible they are able to be about their work in the face of security issues.

6. **Access and commitment to their communities and their people:** Girls are deeply connected to their communities and are often at the forefront of grassroots organising. Their ability to mobilise peers and local networks plays a pivotal role in creating localised, sustainable change. Their fierce courage means that they will often do almost anything to support and protect their people and build worlds that affirm their lives and promote their safety.

7. **Meeting the immediate needs of each other and their communities while organising for long-term systems change:** Girls and young feminists are often simultaneously responding to the harmful conditions people are currently facing while challenging the structural barriers that cause these conditions. This can look like setting up systems of mutual aid in times of a natural disaster, while also working on the root causes of climate justice; or pooling resources for a girl who needs school fees covered, while working to challenge how girls are viewed in their communities; or helping another girl access an abortion in a restricted environment, while organising for reproductive justice and freedom in their country. Girls and young feminists understand the need to meet immediate needs on the journey to liberation.

8. **Joy as resistance:** Girl activists use laughter, art, collaboration, poetry, experimentation, dance, breath, drama and movement as ways to subvert, co-opt and reclaim dominant culture. Joy is a form and function of girls' resistance, and a counter to the pathologisation of social change so often dominant in development spaces.

9. **Creativity as a strategy and tactic:** Creativity lies at the heart of how girls organise. For many, it is the direct use of art in their activism—using poetry, graphics, illustration, murals, graffiti, music, sports, spoken word, and other creative expressions to agitate, protest, reimagine, and demonstrate what is possible. For others, it involves using innovative strategies to challenge deeply entrenched systems of oppression. Through art, storytelling, and digital campaigns, girls use innovative methods to raise awareness and inspire action, making social movements more accessible and engaging for diverse audiences. Girls aren't just reimagining the world—they are actively reshaping it with creativity, often wielding art as a powerful tool of resistance.

10. **Self and collective care:** For girls, self-care and collective care are not just personal acts—they are political strategies deeply intertwined with their resistance and the way they engage in their work. These practices often arise from and are nurtured within autonomous, self-defined spaces that girls themselves create. Such spaces may simply offer a moment to share experiences, process emotions, and seek solidarity amongst peers as they confront the harsh realities of their daily lives. Care takes many forms: art, sport, shared physical or virtual spaces, mediation, movement, sharing meals, reclaiming the right to play, and drawing upon and reinterpreting ancestral practices passed down through generations.

11. **Intersectional:** By highlighting issues like gender-based violence, access to education, climate justice, and reproductive rights, girls ensure that social movements address the unique challenges faced by individuals at the intersections of various forms of oppression, such as race, class, caste, and ability. This is driven by a defining characteristic of girls' activism: their commitment to creating a better world, not just for themselves or their immediate communities, but for everyone. The quest for gender justice therefore lives both comfortably and logically alongside many other social justice struggles, both as a result of, but also despite, a proliferation of online spaces for organising and solidarity-building. All are girls and young feminists who lead, organize, and build solidarity. However, they also face increasing surveillance, the rise of misinformation, targeted harassment, and algorithmic divisions designed to weaken movements and disrupt collective action.

12. **Learning is a constant and flexibility is a practice:** Girls are continuously learning and striving to deepen their understanding of themselves, one another, and the world around them. They often embrace change and evolve their thinking and practices as they learn, pushing back against dominant ways of doing things. A combination of curiosity and a belief in what's possible can create openings for young people as they connect with each other, with blogs, with books, with elders, and beyond. This requires flexibility and can be seen in how girls and young people embrace and create space for constant, and often seamless, adaptations. The sense that things don't need to stay the same is a superpower young people bring to their resistance, and something that all of us benefit from.

13. **Reclaiming space as a form of resistance:** Girls are not only reclaiming their narratives but also physically and symbolically reclaiming spaces where they have been historically excluded. Whether it's occupying public spaces, transforming online platforms into hubs of activism, or creating their own autonomous safe spaces in communities, girls are actively taking back spaces from which they've been historically shut out. This reclamation of space challenges both visible and invisible barriers, asserting their right to exist, organise, and lead in any space they choose, on their own terms. This inevitably leads to the refusal to be diminished by oppressive structures.

Writing and Reflection Questions:

- **Consider a movement that you are a part of or are familiar with.** Map out some of the key moments within that movement, big and small. What did it take for these moments to happen (consider things such as leadership, organising, base building, actions, etc.)? What is required for them to be sustained over time?
- **What do you know about the role of girls and young feminists in this movement?** If you don't know, inquire about their role. Is it easy to find information? What do you learn through your inquiry? What unique role do girls and young feminists play in this movement?
- **Reflect on the long arch of movements, beyond the moments that appear in headlines.** What does it take to sustain movements over a long period of time? What kinds of resources (financial, human, etc.) are required?
- **Consider a right that has been reversed, or at risk of being reversed in your lifetime or throughout history.** What/who was the opposition and how did they work to reverse this right/how were they successful? What does that tell us about the kinds of resources movements need over the long-term?
- **Where have you witnessed the co-option of movements/movement language?** What risks or damage does this bring to movements and social progress?

For further learning:

- *From Singular Acts to Sustained Protest: Defining Girls Resistance*, Stories of Girls' Resistance, 2023.
- *Learn from young feminist movements in Georgia, Mexico, Lebanon, Nigeria, and other countries within the Global South:* "Video: Weaving Constellations of Feminist Organising," FRIDA Fund, February 4, 2021.
- *"Video: Fighting for Women's Rights: Latin America's Feminist Movement,"* DW Documentary, November 24, 2022.,
- *Lighting the Way: A Report for Philanthropy on the Power and Promise of Feminist Movements*, Shake the Table, 2022.
- Amy Littlefield, *"How a Scrappy Group of Young Moms Transformed the Way We Think About Teen Pregnancy,"* Nation, May 12, 2023.

Case Studies on Girls Driving Social and Systemic Change

The following section presents three case studies that solidify the contributions girls and young feminists have made to social change around the world. By documenting specific movements, these case studies not only highlight where girls and young feminists have played central roles in achieving significant advancements—or movement "wins"—but also serve as critical tools to resist erasure and co-optation.

Case Study One: Access to Education | This case study highlights the ways in which girls in South Africa, Afghanistan, and Sierra Leone ensured their educational access through creative and transformational strategies.

Case Study Two: Ending Sexual and Gender-Based Violence | This case study highlights the movement against sexual and gender-based violence in Namibia, focusing on its specific strategies and notable victories across social and political spheres.

Case Study Three: Reproductive Rights and Bodily Autonomy | This case study analyzes the Ola Verde (Green Wave) movement in Latin America, highlighting its organizing and community-building efforts that led to the expansion of the movement and significant legislative victories.

A note on methodology

It is important to note that this research was conducted through a desk review of existing data and is therefore limited due to the lack of documentation of girls' and young feminists' roles in social movements, which has resulted in the erasure of their contributions. To get a true recount of history we must resource and support efforts to document and amplify the stories of girls and young feminists who participated across a range of movements, such as Young and Restless: The Girls Who Sparked America's Revolutions, which, through extensive research documents the foundational and underappreciated forces of teenage girls in moments of American revolution, and the Stories of Girls' Resistance, the largest existing data set on girls' lived experiences and activism.

Resourcing documentation increases girls' and young feminists' visibility in social movements and preserves the knowledge they hold, providing us with a more accurate recount of history to honour their efforts. It also provides us with a clear blueprint and roadmap for social change by uncovering their creative and sharp strategies and tactics, and demonstrates what's possible when we move resources to them. **Documenting their efforts proves definitively that girls' and young feminists' visions, strategies, and tactics are contributing to social change efforts across the world and it is critical that we move robust and flexible resources to their efforts.**

Case Study One:

Access to Education

The challenges girls face in accessing education are not new, and neither is the fact that girls have been coming up with creative ways to resist oppression and forge unmarked paths for themselves for centuries. The movement working towards girls gaining access to quality education is nuanced and broad. While a narrow framing for gender parity in education has been a goal at national, global, and civil society levels for decades, girls have been leading movements and advocacy efforts towards a broader vision for their education. Girls are advocating for and demanding an education that is accessible and safe, where all girls feel welcome regardless of their identities or life circumstances, and where they have access to the necessary services and support structures for themselves and their communities. Girls' vision and advocacy extends beyond traditional and state-run schools—they are advocating for safe and welcoming community spaces and learning and educational opportunities outside of traditional classrooms. Girls do this work with each other across contexts and with stakeholders at every level of society. This case study highlights the ways in which girls in South Africa, Afghanistan, and Sierra Leone ensured their educational access through creative and transformational strategies.

Contextualising the Movement

It is estimated that 129 million girls around the world are out of school and women make up two thirds of the 763 million adults who lack basic literacy skills. Despite there being more girls enrolling in school than ever before, accessing education continues to be a global challenge for girls who face a myriad of barriers that prevent them from receiving and completing a quality education.

> *Only 49 per cent of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education. At the secondary level, the gap widens: 42 per cent of countries have achieved gender parity in lower secondary education, and 24 per cent in upper secondary education.*
>
> *The reasons are many. Barriers to girls' education—like poverty, child marriage and gender-based violence—vary among countries and communities. Poor families often favour boys when investing in education. In some places, schools do not meet the safety, hygiene or sanitation needs of girls. In others, teaching practices are not gender-responsive and result in gender gaps in learning and skills development."* – UNICEF

These barriers are further compounded when we consider girls' experiences through the lens of intersectionality. The struggle to access quality education intensifies when girls experience multiple forms of oppression alongside the oppression they face for simply being girls. For example, girls from marginalised, minoritised, racialised, and persecuted communities, disabled girls, girls living in and through conflict, trans girls, pregnant and parenting girls, intersex girls, and queer girls are faced with additional challenges in accessing education. For many of these girls, even in a context where there is gender parity by a codified law, there can be limited access to education due to several factors such as systemic injustices, cultural norms, and institutional barriers that are not addressed by legal measures alone.

For example, in a number of countries, there have been recent lifts on bans for pregnant and parenting girls to go to school, meaning by law they are allowed to go to school. However, in certain contexts, pregnant and parenting girls still face high levels of stigma and discrimination from teachers, administrators, peers, and community members, resulting in them not being, or feeling, welcome in schools. In addition to

stigma, there are practical barriers such as the lack of childcare facilities and flexible school schedules to accommodate the needs of young mothers. This often forces pregnant and parenting girls to choose between their education and their responsibilities at home, creating a significant drop in attendance and completion rates among this group.

Similarly, girls with disabilities face high levels of stigma and discrimination from teachers and the community, along with physical barriers such as inaccessible school buildings and a lack of appropriate learning materials. When compounded with lack of access to health and education, such as menstrual health, the access to education decreases sharply. While it is important to have the right laws in place, it cannot stop there. We need to invest in constituency-led movements that have been historically excluded and under invested because even if national statistics suggest that girls are better off today than they were historically, systemic harms continue to impact girls, often resulting in huge consequences to their wellbeing and living conditions (i.e., gender-based violence, school enrollment, climate safety).

The challenges girls face in accessing education are not new, and neither is the fact that girls have been coming up with creative ways to resist oppression and forge unmarked paths for themselves for centuries. Whilst gender parity in education has been a goal at national, global, and civil society levels for decades, the movement working towards girls gaining access to quality education is nuanced and broad and girls have been leading movements and advocacy efforts for a broader vision of their education. They are advocating for and demanding an education that is accessible and safe, where all girls feel welcome regardless of their identities or life circumstances, and where they have access to the necessary services and support structures for themselves and their communities. Their advocacy extends beyond traditional and state-run schools, to promote safe communal spaces and learning opportunities outside of traditional classrooms. Girls do this work with each other across contexts and with stakeholders at every level of society.

Girls drive the movement, in their everyday lives and through key moments of collaboration and solidarity, lifting each other up and refusing to accept less than what they deserve and need. They are experts in their experiences, uniquely positioned to craft visions of what it means to access education in ways that work for them. The following examples shine light on some of those different contexts, bringing to life the complexity present in the challenges girls face as well as in their responses to such challenges.

South Africa

Where Girls' Education Is Racist, They Spark Movements for Equal Rights

In 2016, Black girls in South Africa sparked a national movement that drew attention to and challenged the continuation of racist practices in the education system. The movement gained international attention and resulted in dialogues with and support from the Ministry of Education, as well as an independent investigation into racism within the girls' school. Not only did this send a clear message about the lack of tolerance for racist practices in the South African education system, but it showed the power of girls' organising and the importance of considering inclusivity from an intersectional perspective when we think about what it truly means to access education.

> *I led a protest where I was threatened with arrest, and at the time decided to take a stand [because] I was being forced to assimilate to whiteness and being forced to assimilate to an image that I did not fit into. It [hair] was a tool being used to enforce oppression on me"*
> **– Zulaikha Patel, founder of "Stop Racism at Pretoria High School for Girls", who was 13 years old at the time of the protest**

IIn 2016, 22 years after South Africa held its first democratic election at the end of apartheid, students attending an all-girls school in Pretoria, which was designated as a "white" school during the apartheid era in South Africa, held a silent protest against the school's rules regarding student hairstyles. During the protest, Black girls shared how they were told by the school they needed to straighten their hair, with Afros being deemed "untidy." They also spoke in detail of their experiences of racism from both teachers and white students. Although the school called the police, who arrived with guns and police dogs, the girls stood strong and continued to share their stories, drawing national and international attention and eliciting a supportive response from the South African government.

Photo above: Zulaikha Patel stands with her fists raised and crossed surrounded by other protestors at Pretoria High Girls School, 2016. Source: Essence Magazine

Some may say that this was a simple issue of students not following school rules. They may even support the idea that afros are "untidy" and not appropriate for school. However, looking at this incident as a simple debate about school rules without considering (and thus neutralising) the racial, gendered, and historical dynamics at play is an example of how depoliticisation occurs. The rules of the school targeted Black girls, placing pressure on them to chemically alter their hair in order to conform to standards that could only be met by students with naturally straight hair. Deeming the natural hair of Black students "untidy" whilst using the natural hair of students who are not Black as the norm is an example of anti-Black racism.

The meanings that have been attached to Black hair in general and Black women's hair in particular—the constant debates about what hairstyles are most appropriate for Black women and the ways in which the beauty industry has capitalised on this— are an example of how poignant the issue is. When we contextualise this incident in relation to South Africa's history of apartheid and consider apartheid-era practices such as the "pencil test"—which involved using a pencil to determine one's proximity to whiteness based on the density of their hair and curls, with the pencil easily dropping out being the goal—we are able to observe racism in two ways. Firstly, standards of whiteness continued to prevail in institutions such as schools 22 years after apartheid ended, resulting in the control of Black girls' bodies at an institutional level. Secondly, the police, who have historically been used as a tool with which to discipline and oppress Black people and their bodies, continue to be used in this way. It raises questions such as, *was this a proportionate response to students holding a silent protest? Would the police be called if white students were doing the same thing? How did the school come to perceive Black students as a threat?*

Through organising a protest, collectivising, and proudly wearing their hair in its natural state and sharing their experiences of racism to each other, across the community, and to the world through multiple channels, Black girls challenged the rules of the school and highlighted the injustices they were facing. Their organised actions and movement building through #StopRacismAtPretoriaGirlsHigh garnered the attention of the whole country on social media and local and international news outlets. The girls' action inspired the creation of a petition, addressing the minister of education and the school principal, demanding an investigation and review of the school's conduct. Their action led to a statement being issued by the ministry of education affirming that girls were allowed to wear Afros to school, as well as an independent investigation into incidents of racism at the school.

The movement "win" here is multifaceted: Black girls took a stand and were supported in wearing their natural hair to school, racist school practices were directly challenged at government level, and thousands of South Africans and people across the world were spurned into a conversation reflecting on the legacies of apartheid, anti-Black racism and the politics of Black hair. This would not have happened in this way had those girls not decided to resist and take action. In doing so, they sparked a movement across the country and beyond.

This case study clearly demonstrates that even when girls have equal access to education, they may face additional challenges that hinder their ability to focus on their studies in affirming and inclusive environments. It is thus not enough to simply support girls in accessing education with the aim of gender parity. If the goal is true equality, all systems of domination must be challenged and toppled.

> *"I'm motivated to bring change in society because I believe no young person should abandon their childhood to fight struggles that should have been fought decades ago."* – *Zulaikha Patel, 2020 interview with Global Citizen*

Steps must be taken to challenge the multiple forms of oppression that can be reproduced within institutions such as schools, stemming from the specific contexts in which they are situated, such as post-apartheid South Africa in this instance. This highlights the importance of using intersectionality as a framework for understanding how oppression operates; without it we are unable to truly consider how those facing gendered inequality can also face racial inequality, as well as how legacies of the past can continue to shape the inequalities of the present. Further, it illustrates how we can never truly understand the depths of girls' educational needs beyond simply gaining access to education without listening to their stories and experiences of their respective education systems.

This underscores the critical need of centering their voices in efforts to bring about systemic change in education and supporting the movements they initiate, lead, and participate in. Only they can articulate the full extent of what is required for them to access education equally.

Learn more about this movement:

- Luso Mnthali, "Anti-Blackness At Its Core: Pretoria Girls High School Protests Are About More than Hair," *Essence*, October 26, 2020.
- "Racism Row over South Africa School's Alleged Hair Policy," *Guardian*, August 29, 2016.
- "Racist School Hair Rules' Suspended at SA's Pretoria Girls High," *BBC*, August 30, 2016.
- "It's Not Just Hair, It's a Statement of Identity," Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, date unknown.

Photo: Nava Jamshidi/Getty Images

Afghanistan

Where Girls' Education is Forbidden, They Forge Networks of Resistance Underground

Since the education ban was put into place in 2021 in Afghanistan, girls have been putting themselves at great risk in order to access education. The current movement of secret schools is built on an existing legacy that was established by girls who faced an education ban more than 20 years ago in Afghanistan, speaking to the intergenerational nature of movements. The school ban exacerbates pre-existing inequalities within the country: when girls work to receive their education in secret, they are not just working to learn and complete their studies, they are working to collectively survive in conditions that actively work to limit their survival.

Since August 2021, when the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, girls over the age of 12 have been banned from receiving secondary and tertiary education. The Taliban has been able to violently control Afghanistan because of the imperialist chaos created by Western and Russian control, incursions, and interference over the last several decades. This is not the first time girls have been prevented from furthering their education in Afghanistan, a similar ban was implemented during Taliban rule between 1996 and 2001. In both instances—then and now—many girls have found creative ways to continue with their studies in secret. Every class they attend and every note they take puts them at great risk; and yet, girls continue to show up to learn and to pass on what they have learnt to other girls in their communities.

> *Being among the girls and studying with them motivates me. If we don't confine ourselves from within, nobody can confine us from the outside. We are a chain of people here who help each other to survive the misery the Taliban has caused us."* – Diba, Afghanistan, Student

The Taliban's severe restrictions on female education has triggered a surge in underground schools across Afghanistan, despite the great risk to students and teachers. The creation of a network of underground schools is a mechanism of resistance that requires the mobilisation of girls as well as the volunteers who teach them and host their classes. Timetables need to be created, locations chosen and shared,

Photo above: Girls sit huddled around a table writing in books at a secret school in Kabul. Credit: Nava Jamshidi/Getty Images

materials sourced, internet connections established, and distances travelled—all in the context of gendered surveillance that ensures the movements, behaviours, and activities of women and girls remain restricted.

Crafted over time and generations, girls in Afghanistan are utilising strategies created by girls who came before them and experienced similar oppression in order to pursue their educational goals and resist the gendered oppression they are facing. Girls are maintaining and growing an intergenerational movement "legacy" that speaks to the resilience and resistance of girls when they are banned from fulfilling their dreams.

This movement is built not only on the legacy of the last girls who resisted an education ban in Afghanistan, but also in relation to a context of educational and socio-economic inequalities that existed before the second education ban in the country. It is thus cumulative, layered on top of an existing landscape of gendered inequality in education and more broadly in society. Prior to the Taliban banning girls from secondary and tertiary education in 2021, girls made up 60 percent (over 2.52 million) of all out of school children in Afghanistan (over 4.2 million). This means that when the ban came into place, it compounded an already existing issue of gender inequality in education in Afghanistan. In 2022, UNICEF estimated that over 3 million girls were in secondary education before the ban was implemented, meaning that none of them were able to complete their education or continue into higher education and the number of girls out of education was doubled overnight.

The impact of this ban extends far beyond girls being unable to complete their education and pursue a multitude of careers: not only does being out of school limit adolescent girls' access to school-based health and nutrition services, but they are placed at an even higher risk of child marriage, trafficking, and domestic violence. Problems that already existed prior to the implementation of the education ban. In addition to these risks, being out of school is having an impact on girls' mental health and the shortage of mental health professionals in Afghanistan will be further impacted by the reduction of students training in these professions as a result of the university ban on girls and women. The ban on girls accessing education is thus part of a cycle of oppression that impacts every aspect of society.

Defying the education ban is not simply girls working towards completing an education, it is girls carving out places of safety for themselves, it is girls treating their mental health and caring for one another, it is girls building community in the midst of the destruction of their communal spaces and building tools for survival. While it might be hard to see this as a movement "win" because girls remain banned from accessing education in Afghanistan, it is important to recognise that against all odds, girls and their allies are finding ways to access education, using the mobilisation and growth of an intergenerational strategy, a powerful and effective resource. The "win" is in girls finding ways to survive in spaces that work to reduce them; it is in girls continuing to dream of their futures on their own terms, and finally, it is in girls accessing education and finding adult allies who are willing to support them to do so.

Learn more about this movement:

- "Afghanistan: Eighteen Months After Ban, Classroom Doors Must Open for Secondary School Girls," Save the Children, March 15, 2023.
- "Devastated and Dispirited: Barred from Continuing Their Education, Girls in Afghanistan Lose Hope," UNICEF, March 28, 2023.
- Elaine Unterhalter, "The History of Secret Education for Girls in Afghanistan–and Its Use as a Political Symbol," *The Conversation*, August 23, 2022.
- Joe Wallen, "Inside the Secret Schools Where Afghan Girls Learn in Defiance of the Taliban," *Telegraph*, August 29, 2022.
- Hoda Javdani, "How Afghan Women and Girls Are Defying the Taliban with Secret Schools: 'We Are Not Alone,'" Big Issue, January 22, 2024.
- Aalia Farzan and Flora Drury, "Afghanistan: Teen Girls Despair as Taliban School Ban Continues," BBC, March 23, 2024.

Sierra Leone

Where Pregnant Girls Are Banned from Schools, They Centre Their Experiences to Elicit Change

After the government of Sierra Leone officially banned pregnant girls from attending school in 2015, girls worked together in a coalition with grassroots organisations and allies to challenge the ban. Sharing their stories of pregnancy, parenting, and being denied an education, girls harnessed the power of their lived experiences to advocate for change. As a result of their collective work, the coalition took the government of Sierra Leone to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice where it was determined that the government had violated girls' rights to an education, and the education ban was officially overturned in 2020. Through fighting for their rights, making their voices heard, and collaborating with adult allies, girls were able to elicit a national policy change in Sierra Leone.

In 2010, the government of Sierra Leone announced that visibly pregnant girls would be banned from attending school and accessing an education. Although it was officially decided and announced in 2010 and formalised in 2015, the ban had been in place informally for decades. Sierra Leone's independent government comes after more than 200 years of British colonial rule and an 11-year civil war. Steeped in patriarchal attitudes that worked to punish girls and deny them their right to education, the ban situated them as solely responsible for their pregnancies without considering the role of boys and men, as well as the varying and complex reasons for girls getting pregnant such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), child marriage, poverty, and a lack of access to comprehensive information on SRHR.

In response to the ban, girls worked together with civil society organisations to resist the ban, advocate for their rights, and share their stories, and in 2020 the ban was officially overturned.

The education ban was detrimental to girls in a number of ways; not only did it deny pregnant girls access to school but it also perpetuated harmful stigma and normalised behaviours that infringed upon girls' privacy. In some schools, the ban was enforced using physical searches that were conducted by authority figures to "test" girls for pregnancy, violating their dignity and bodily autonomy. Although not part of government policy, research from 2015 suggests that the practice of public "testing" for pregnancy in some schools was widely known. At the same time,

Photo above: Girls and their allies stand with their thumbs up smiling at the camera in Freetown. Credit: Equality Now.

patriarchal stigma within schools was reinforced, with pregnant girls experiencing discrimination from other students and teachers. Both the "testing" and the stigma resulted in pregnant girls avoiding school and girls who had given birth dropping out of school entirely. Alongside this stigma, other reasons for girls not returning to school included being unable to find childcare in order to attend class, a lack of financial resources for school fees, and child marriage.

Despite these realities, girls resisted the ban and actively found ways to access their education. Mariatu Sesay persuaded the headmaster at her school to allow her to continue her classes while pregnant. Through advocating for herself, Mariatu was able to mobilise adult allies to support her. Mariatu continued to share her story and speak out against the ban to news outlets, bringing national attention to the issue.

She is not the only one who bravely spoke out against the ban and fought for her right to education. In 2019, girls impacted by the ban took over a courtroom in central Freetown, where a feminist legal team and special judge heard case after case of girls who had been denied access to the classroom because of their pregnancy. Further, a coalition of girl activists, adult allies and grassroots organisations worked to file a case of discrimination against the government of Sierra Leone at the ECOWAS Court of Justice in 2018, arguing that the government had breached girls' right to education.

As a result of their relentless and courageous advocacy, at the end of 2019, the ECOWAS court found that the government of Sierra Leone "had breached the girls' right to education, declared it discriminatory, and violated the girls' right to education," resulting in the end of this ban in March 2020. **Ultimately, it was the power of this movement driven by girls and a community facing injustice that saw a critical win of a national policy change in Sierra Leone, ensuring the codified protection of the right to education for pregnant girls.**

Writing and Reflection Prompts for Access to Education Case Study:

- **List the various ways girls mobilised in this study.** How did the movement start and how did it evolve? What became possible when girls demanded change? What does this case study tell us about the role of shifting discourse through storytelling and narrative change? What does it demonstrate about centering the voices, agency, and power of those with lived experience?
- **Where did you see the role of intergenerational organising and solidarity in this case study?** What role did adult allies play in the movement for radical inclusion in school policies? What role did they play in girls accessing education in Afghanistan? How did adult allies play a meaningful role while continuing to centre girls' power?
- **What are the different ways** the authorities responded in this case study?
- **What do you understand** as the wider systemic impact in this case study?
- **Describe the various dimensions** of intersectionality girls are experiencing in this case study.

Learn more about this movement:

- "Sierra Leone: Shamed and Blamed; Pregnant Girls' Rights at Risk in Sierra Leone," Amnesty International, November 6, 2015.
- "Madam K – Sierra Leone," Equality Now, March 12, 2020.
- "Sierra Leone: Discriminatory Ban on Pregnant Girls Attending School Is Lifted," Amnesty International, March 30, 2020.
- Chernor Bah, "Sierra Leone: 'Radical Inclusion' Approach to Education an Extraordinary Victory for Pregnant Girls," AllAfrica, March 27, 2020.
- "One Year On: How the Lives Of Girls in Sierra Leone Have Changed Since Their Historic Victory at the ECOWAS Court," Equality Now, December 12, 2020.
- Purposeful, "Sierra Leone: Centre Girls' Voices in Education Reforms," Medium, May 8, 2023.

Josephine Kamara, Director of Communications at Purposeful, joined thousands of girls and young women in Sierra Leone to overturn a law that banned pregnant and parenting girls from going to school in Sierra Leone. This is an excerpt from a conversation with Josephine in 2024 about how raising their voices, sharing their stories and building pregnant and parenting girls' collective power led to the passing of the Radical Inclusion in Schools Policy in Sierra Leone.

"The fight for the Radical Inclusion in School Policy started in 2010, when pregnant girls refused to stay home from school in the face of a law that banned their attendance. The ban lasted for 10 years before it was overturned– a result that was only possible because of the bravery, determination, and strategic clarity of pregnant and parenting girls and young women.

During the Ebola crisis, schools were shut down for a year and facilities where girls would normally get health and SRHR services were closed. Fourteen thousand girls became pregnant at a time when girls were supposed to be in lockdown, quarantining with families. The contradiction of the response was mind blowing. In Sierra Leone, girls under 15 cannot consent to sex. Yet, with the uptick of pregnancy instead of asking "why are girls getting pregnant when they are staying home with their families? Why are they being sexually abused in their homes, a place where they should be protected and comfortable?", girls were the ones that were punished, and were further victimised by being banned from attending school.

For 10 years, girls spoke up in pockets and in isolation about the ban. Even when people wouldn't listen, for 10 years consistently, they continued to speak up and refused to stay home from school. They put on their school uniforms, and went to school visibly pregnant, refusing to be quiet. Many were kicked out of school, sparking an outrage and the Radical Inclusion in School Policy Campaign.

Pregnant and parenting girls—and teenage mothers who could not go back to school—formed the Coalition for Girls' Education, in partnership with adult allies. I was an adult activist then, and as someone who faced a lot to stay in school when I became pregnant at 16, I understood first hand what they were going through. We began bringing together the voices of people with similar stories, similar experiences, who shared their stories of being pregnant and not being able to stay in school. We became the largest coalition in Sierra Leone pushing against this ban. We were sharing these stories and going beyond to tell the president this was not right. He was saying human capital is the most important thing in a country, that education is important—we challenged him, asking him if this is what you believe, how can you say pregnant girls cannot go to school. We made a documentary and shared it all over the country and the world. The stories humanised the issue by sharing girls' experiences and showing that the 14,000 girls are not just numbers, they are actually people.

We partnered with Equality Now and other organisations to take the case to the ECOWAS courts and some of the girls were able to testify. We kept pushing in Sierra Leone and sharing stories of what girls continued to experience in schools. We created a people's court in Sierra Leone for those who could not go to ECOWAS, inviting people to the national criminal court to give testimonies. Change is slow and takes consistent advocacy but finally after almost a decade and continuous movement building and advocacy, the law changed.

In 2020, Purposeful was invited to co-lead a Sexual and Reproductive Health Taskforce that helped to write the Radical Inclusion in School Policy. I worked on it at the time and we now have a radical inclusion in school policy that was written with the help of pregnant and parenting girls and young women. Pregnant girls can now go to school because girls shared their stories, they protested in courts, they went to the President's state house to deliver letters, and they led consistent efforts on radio, TV and community. People do not hand over power—we must demand it. Girls refused to stay home, they wore their uniforms while pregnant and they would not be silenced. They banned together, with each other and allies. This is how change happens. People do not want to fund movements because we use the words resistance and protest. But, this is the only way change will happen. We know this from every example of change in history.

Josephine was also a storyteller in the Stories of Girls' Resistance collection, click here to read her story.

Case Study Two:

Ending Sexual and Gender Based Violence

Girls and young feminists are at the forefront of working towards a future where violence no longer exists—from supporting survivors of violence through the creation of laws and the provision of access to services, to creating moments of solidarity and continuously saying the names of survivors to honor, raise visibility, and awareness, to opening platforms that allow for survivors to tell their own stories in their own words. Through their brave efforts they are challenging the social norms that give men power over girls, women, and gender-diverse persons. This work is not easy or straightforward; as with all movements, the movement fighting against sexual and gender-based violence is multifaceted and nuanced. The following case study shines light on one such example in Namibia.

Contextualising the Movement

It is estimated that 1 in 3 women will experience physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their lifetime. Most violence against women is perpetrated by current or former husbands or intimate partners, and "of those who have been in a relationship, almost one in four adolescent girls aged 15–19 (24%) has experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner or husband." Further, women and girls are disproportionately affected by homicidal violence in the home: they represent approximately 53 percent of all victims of killings in the home and 66 percent of all victims of intimate partner killings.

When analysing SGBV on a historical and global level, it becomes evident that this is not a new phenomenon but rather deeply entrenched as a legacy of systems of oppression such as colonialism. There is no doubt that no matter where they are, women and girls navigate the world at risk of multiple forms of violence as a result of their gender. Further, these forms of violence are compounded for girls and women who experience multiple forms of oppression; the risk of SGBV is even higher, for example, for girls and women with disabilities along with other forms of marginalisation.

Everywhere that girls are living through and surviving violence—in their families, homes, schools, and streets—they are also finding ways to survive, to defy, to push back, to organise. As long as violence continues, so too will movements working to end it. Girls and young feminists are at the forefront of changing this reality for themselves and all of us —from supporting survivors of violence through the creation of laws and the provisions of access to services, to creating moments of solidarity and saying the names of survivors, to creating platforms that allow survivors to tell their own stories in their own words. They are simultaneously working towards a future where violence no longer exists by challenging the social norms that give men power over girls, women, and gender-diverse persons. This work is not easy or straightforward; as with all movements, the movements working to end sexual and gender-based violence is multifaceted and nuanced. The following case study shines light on one such example in Namibia.

Namibia

When Girls Are Threatened with Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, They Shut It All Down

> *The Namibian youth have begun to take a keen interest in the Namibian landscape and have become action-driven. This comes from a place of educating oneself on the happenings on the ground and it [X] has created a platform that allows for access to information, open debate and advocacy. As the youth, we are the future of the country, and our voices matter. We are effective because we understand the power our voices hold and the power in numbers."*
> – Mavis Braga Elias

In October 2020, girls and young activists took to the streets of Windhoek and other cities across Namibia to protest against the rates of SGBV in the country. The campaign was born on X (formerly Twitter) and then went to the streets, showing the use of social media to engage protestors, plan marches, educate citizens, and document developments. The #ShutItAllDown movement has "shone a merciless light on failing ministries, incompetent ministers, an ineffective police force and the urgent need for law reform."

In the 18 months preceding July 2020, over 1,600 cases of rape were reported to the police in Namiibia. Considering the population of the country is around 2.5 million people and that instances of rape are drastically underreported, these figures are significant. Gathering outside of government buildings, protestors used the slogan #ShutItAllDown, which started trending on social media and garnered national and international attention. The protests began shortly after the remains of 20-year-old Shannon Wasserfall, who went missing in April 2020, were discovered. Shannon, like so many other girls and young women in Namibia and across the globe, was a victim of **femicide**.

> *You stay, you're abused. You leave, you get murdered. You go to the police, they victim blame, lose case docs or arrive too late. You protest, law enforcement harasses or arrests you. If this is not actual flaming hell. #OnsIsMoeg (we are tired)."*
> **– Martha Mukaiwa, Namibia, Writer**

The UN estimates that 26.7 percent of women in Namibia will experience physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime. These experiences are particularly prevalent amongst girls: "The Violence Against Children and Youth in Namibia 2019 Survey found that 15% of women aged 18–24 experienced pressured or forced sex when they were 13 years old or younger, 45% experienced this between the ages of 14 and 15, and 39% between 16 and 17 years old."

It is no coincidence that the #ShutItAllDown protests took place during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, where rates of violence against women and girls (VAWG) increased, with global statistics estimating that 45 percent of women reported that they or women they knew had experienced some form of VAWG in 2021. Because instances of VAWG are underreported, it is likely that these figures are even higher in reality. The COVID-19 lockdown exacerbated pre-existing dynamics of gendered oppression, placing women and girls who were already at risk in even more vulnerable positions. It was within this context, that girls and young activists sparked a movement in Namibia, which was supported nationally by citizens as well as by civil society organisations, such as Sister Namibia.

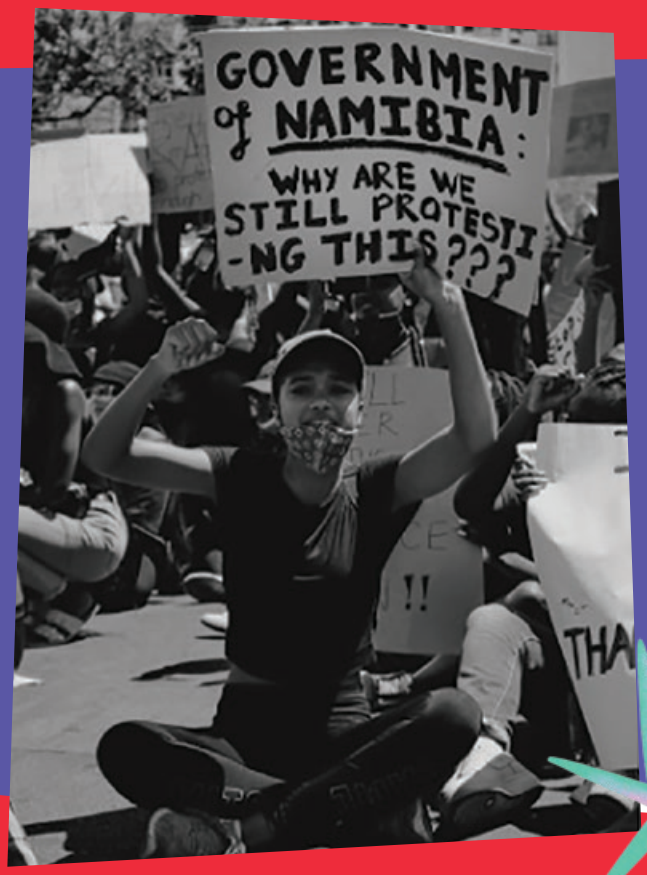
> *"The idea of disruption, as a means of protesting, is about confronting docile and properly maintained systems of power. It's about asserting that abnormal situations require action that is, in itself, disruptive, drastic and abnormal."* – Anne Hambuda, Activist

The protestors delivered a petition to the government that detailed their demands. On the third day of protesting they were met with violent responses from police, who used teargas, rubber bullets, and batons to try and disperse them. Activists took to social media again to expose the violence they were facing at the hands of the police. "This is a protest against violence against women and here we have women being beaten as they are being arrested," protester Maria Amupolo told AFP news agency holding a banner that read "We are tired" in Afrikaans. "I saw it with my own two eyes, they hit that one girl and slapped her as they threw her into the van."

Windhoek, 2020. Protestors hold a handwritten poster that says: "Dear Shannon, This country has stolen from you! They stole your right to a future! They stole your son's right to your love! They stole your family's right to your warmth! They have taken our peace! Rest assured the thieves will not rest!!"
Source: Windhoek Observer

A summary of the demands made in the #Shutitalldown petition to the government:

1. The president declare a national state of emergency in response to the rates of femicide and SGBV and consult with SGBV experts on how to immediately respond to and curb the rates of SGBV;
2. The Ministry of Justice expedite the review of and action on multiple judicial processes relating to SGBV;
3. The Namibian Police Force increase armed patrols, retrain and reorganise the police force;
4. The Ministry of Basic Education, Arts, and Culture and Namibian Institutes of Higher Learning immediately mandate the creation of rape and sexual violence prevention curriculums and review of rules and disciplinary procedures and address SGBV in schools and higher education;
5. The immediate resignation of Doreen Sioka, Minister of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication, and Social Welfare;
6. The review of sexual harassment policy and provision of SGBV sensitivity training in the private sector.



A protester sits in the street with one hand in a fist and the other hand holding a placard that says "Government of Namibia: Why are we still protesting this???". Photo: @angy_pangy_ on X

Within days of the protests, the Prime Minister of Namibia responded to the petition with a letter which addressed most of the demands by providing updates on the current work being undertaken in each area and in some instances plans for future adjustments.

A summary of the Government response:

- Commitment to expedite completion of sexual offenders' registry
- Confirmation of establishment of sexual and GBV offences court
- Commitment by the executive to improve the effectiveness and capacity of investigations into SGBV
- Commitment to providing more resources to law enforcement
- Commitment to ensuring capacity of GBV protection units
- Provision of a report on current or in process response strategies within the education sector

The swift response from the government, which acknowledged many of the protestor's demands and committed to several actions, speaks to the power of what girls and young feminists were able to achieve in the #ShutItAllDown movement. In addition to the policy wins gained during these protests, the role of girls and young activists in the #ShutItAllDown movement and the fight for safer communities in Namibia was recognised. This is unusual because most often the work and contribution of girls within movements is overlooked, resulting in their experiences being marginalised and their needs being underrepresented. In the #ShutItAllDown movement girls were front and centre, raising their voices and demanding to be heard. **The international impact of the protests and creation of a comprehensive list of demands offers a shining example of the power girls have when it comes to organising, mobilising, and articulating their needs.** Although the fight against SGBV continues, there is no doubt that girls are a central and essential part of that fight.

When the #ShutItAllDown movement gained traction on X in 2020 and took demands to the street, it represented a movement moment in a long fight for an end to violence against girls and women. Often movement moments are triggered by an event. For example, when the #MeToo movement went viral in response to news reports of sexual abuse by American film producer Harvey Weinstein in 2017. Or the launch of the Black Tuesday movement in 2020 after the report of a brutal rape of a 4-year-old girl in Sierra Leone; the strength of this movement helpedlaunch Sister Solidarity Fund a year later and after the sexual assault of two 5-year-old girls. Like the 2020 #ShutItAllDown campaign, these are vital moments in a longer-term movement that help advance the cause. But because movements are addressing deep-rooted injustices and the kind of change that requires generational shifts, movements must be sustained over time, well beyond the moments that make the headlines.

While the government did respond to #ShutItAllDown and it resulted in some advancements we can consider a movement "win," the fight to end violence against girls and women in Namibia continues. For example, the #ShutItAllDown movement highlighted that while seemingly sufficiently on paper, the legal frameworks that already existed in Namibia were not translating into reality and the risk of the proposed changes having a significant impact on the everyday lives of girls and women in the country remained. Further, the movement raised questions surrounding the ways in which the police force were mobilised against the protestors; the same police force that was expected to support survivors, many of whom were no doubt met with violence during the protest.

Therefore, while protesters might not be on the street today, the movement continues to work to strengthen legal frameworks, to hold power holders accountable, to ensure survivors of gender-based violence have the services and support structures they need, and to raise mass consciousness.

> *"There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures."* – bell hooks, Killing Rage: Ending Racism

Writing and Reflection Prompts for Ending Sexual and Gender- Based Violence Case Study

- **List the various ways girls mobilised in this study.** How was this moment sparked and how did it evolve?
- **How did authorities respond in this case study?** Was it sufficient? How do activists continue to hold the line and push for structural change to end violence in Namibia and beyond?
- **What are the different ways the authorities responded in this case study?**
- **What do you understand as the wider systemic impact in this case study?**
- **Describe the various dimensions** of intersectionality girls are experiencing in this case study.
- **What does this case study tell us about the long-term nature of movements?** How can this inform how funders and others in positions of formal power can resource and support movements over time?

Learn more about this movement

- Henning Melber, "#ShutItAllDown in Namibia–the Fight Against Gender-Based Violence, The Conversation, October 29, 2020.
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- "GBV Laws and Policies in Namibia," End GBV Africa.
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Case Study Three:

Reproductive Rights and Bodily Autonomy

Girls and young feminists are at the forefront of fighting for bodily autonomy in every part of the world, including across Latin America. As a result of decades of organising, showing up, and pushing back through the Ola Verde (Green Wave movement), we saw the tides turn in Argentina, Mexico, and Colombia where abortion was decriminalised. Across the continent, and the world, girls and young feminists are showing their capacity to sustain and expand movements, as well as to organise and inspire each other

Contextualising the Movement

Reproductive rights and bodily autonomy—that is each person's right to make decisions about their own body—have existed for the vast majority of history. However, as a measure of control and exploitation, European imperial countries exported their laws and policies throughout the regions they colonised, the legacies of which still remain vivid across their landscapes.

Today, around 45 percent of abortions are unsafe, meaning nearly half of all people in need of abortions experience significant risks to their health. The prevalence of unsafe abortions speaks to the fact that reducing access to abortion does not stop people from seeking them. Each year, it is estimated that 15 percent of unsafe abortions take place among girls between the ages of 15 and 19, and girls and young women make up one third of all abortion related deaths. This means that girls and young women are at higher risk of death from unsafe abortions.

At the same time, there exists a significant gap in the existing data surrounding the sexual and reproductive experiences of girls between the ages of 10 to 14, despite the size of this group of the population. This suggests that the risks posed to this age group are overlooked and, if considered, may be even higher than estimated. The absence of such data speaks to the tendency to overlook the experiences of girls as a result of their age and to group them in under the umbrella of women without considering the nuances of their age-specific experiences.

Existing data indicates that most unsafe abortions take place in post-colonial countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Across these regions, girls and young women between the ages of 15 and 24 experience 41 percent of unsafe abortions. There are numerous reasons for a lack of access to safe abortion around the world; including, but not limited to, the cost of safe abortions, societal stigma around abortion, refusal to provide abortions by healthcare practitioners; the criminalisation of abortion, and restrictive conditions for when and how a person may access abortions. Lack of access to safe abortions is a human rights issue:

> *Inaccessibility of quality abortion care risks violating a range of human rights of women and girls, including the right to life; the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; the right to benefit from scientific progress and its realization; the right to decide freely and responsibly on the number, spacing and timing of children; and the right to be free from torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment."*
> – World Health Organization

As well as posing multiple risks to the aforementioned human rights of girls, women, and pregnant people, limiting or preventing access to safe abortion also poses threats to their bodily autonomy. This threat is directly connected to patriarchal oppression in that it reduces their right to make choices about their bodies and places the power to do so into the hands of decision makers who are usually men and those upholding the patriarchy. The movement for reproductive rights has actively been challenging these dynamics for decades and urging for the right to choose to be applied globally, to all girls, women and those assigned female at birth. The following case study takes a closer look at the movement for reproductive rights in Latin America.

Green Wave

When girls are denied access to safe abortions... they make waves

In August, 2018, hundreds of thousands of girls, women and young feminists took to the streets of Buenos Aires, Argentina, to demand access to safe and legal abortion. Donning green bandanas - a colour representing hope, health and life in the country - they gathered to support the passing of a bill to legalise abortion. Although the bill was rejected, this moment is considered by many as the turning point for abortion stigma in Argentina and across Latin America - no longer shrouded in secrecy and shame, abortion became part of public and political discourse. Two years later, in December 2020, abortion was legalised in Argentina and since then a number of other Latin American countries have followed suit. The movement is called the Marea Verde - the Green Wave - and it is fuelled by girls and young feminists.

Photo above: A young woman with text in Spanish written on her back that reads, "The wealthy abort, the poor die" during a pro-choice demonstration in Buenos Aires, Argentina on 10 April 2018. Credit: Natacha Pisarenko / AP

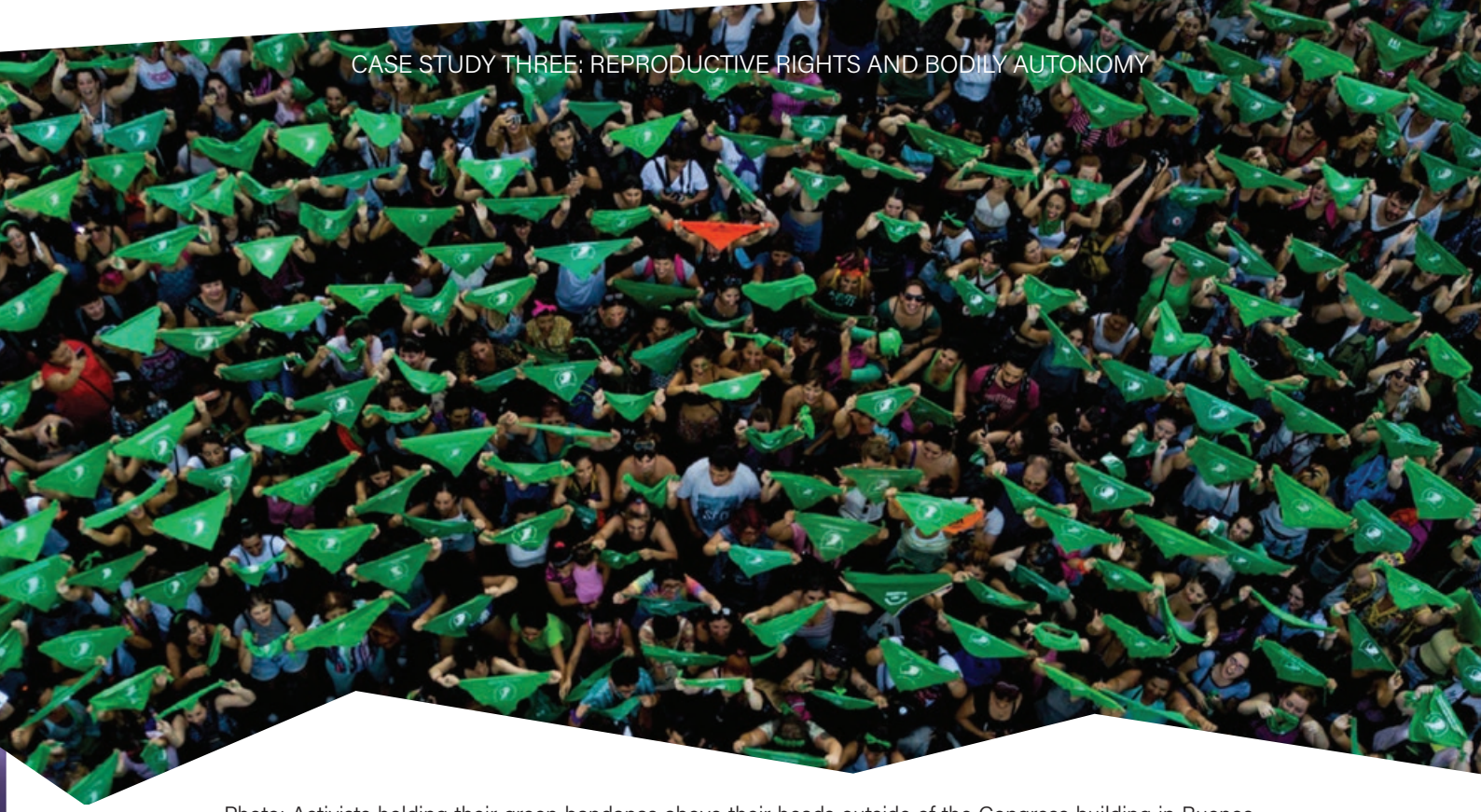

Photo: Activists holding their green bandanas above their heads outside of the Congress building in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 19th February, 2019. Credit: Tomas F. Cuesta/AP Photo

The Green Wave movement did not begin in 2018; in fact, the fight for safe abortion in Argentina spanned decades. This means that the 2020 ruling was a result of the work of generations of girls, young feminists, and women. At the same time, the demonstrations of 2018 saw the mobilisation of girls and young feminists in novel ways—they organised at school and for many, talked openly about abortion for the first time. They formed online communication channels with each other through which to organise and attend demonstrations:

> *Together, thanks to this green wave, young women across Argentina learned to navigate the waters of activism, to harness the power of organisation."* – Yael Crupnicoff, 18.

The excitement grew. Every Tuesday, green protests were held outside Congress. High schools were occupied in support. Journalist Luciana Peker called it "the daughters' revolution." Although they are often too young to vote, the daughters discussed abortion over dinner tables at home and wore their green handkerchiefs on public transport and in schools, helping break the taboo around abortion. Girls and young feminists coordinated their efforts and sustained the movement over time, across the continent and even across the globe. Latin American and Caribbean Green Wave activists attended the UN Summit on Population and Development in Nairobi, Kenya in 2019. Weeks later, Green Wave demonstrations took place in Chile, the following year in El Salvador, and in the Dominican Republic in 2021. In September of 2021, the Supreme Court in Mexico ruled that the criminalisation of abortion was unconstitutional and in 2022, abortion in Colombia was decriminalised on all grounds of pregnancy up to 24 weeks. Late in 2023, the Supreme Court in Brazil opened a case to consider decriminalising abortion. Each of these moments were supported by girls and young feminists who showed up consistently alongside women and feminists on the front lines demanding change; "people [need] to acknowledge and recognise girls and youth as political actors with a voice and the ability to build and create change while maintaining healthy intergenerational alliances."

Activists donning green bandanas celebrate International Safe Abortion Day in the streets of São Paulo Brazil, 2023. Photo:Cris Faga/NurPhoto via AP Photo.

The Green Wave literally swept across the continent of Latin America and, in each country it travelled to, multitudes of girls and young feminists were active participants and organisers. Engaging at every level and across strategies: from organising demonstrations and regional convenings for activists to forming networks that accompany people seeking abortions; to developing creative and vital social media communications strategies to shift narratives, spark conversations, and drive action; to utilising art to develop massive regional and global performances and utilising photographs to document the movement. Girls and young feminists were involved in every moment, passing the baton from one context to another, marching together and standing side by side, they inspired other girls and young feminists in countries across the continent to rise up, speak out and fight for their rights. Each win was a testament to their dedication; each green bandana a symbol of solidarity and an invitation to learn more and demand more.

The power held by girls and young feminists of the Green Wave is multifaceted—on the one hand we see the strength of consistent, organised demonstrations and the impact they can have on the political climate, catalysing conversations in the homes, streets, and across digital spaces that were not previously considered, and relaying a clear message of resilience and the need for change. This is further emphasised through the green bandadas, which become a motif connecting each action and a silent, visual message of solidarity between comrades wherever they go.

> *You could look at complete strangers and feel that they felt the same as you. The streets were ours, and we didn't feel the fear we usually feel in the street at night."* – Carola Ruggiero, 18-year old Argentine activist who started organising in high school

At the same time, through sparking conversations about abortion in schools, girls, and young feminists claimed space for themselves and encouraged others around them to do the same:

> *At my school, the green wave made a huge impact. Signs started appearing on the walls that read 'My body, my choice," 'Keep religion and law separate' and 'Women united will never be defeated.' Text chains began to circulate, arranging for students to march together. Upperclasswomen were taking the lead and guiding the younger ones. For the first time in my school's history, conversations about politics flooded our classrooms and could not be contained inside them. We had an assembly about the importance of the issue and got the headmaster to agree to let us march from the school to Congress."* – Yael Crupnicoff, 18

Through demanding engagement on abortion and planning actions in their schools, they sent a clear message: that girls and young feminists are able to organise and they know exactly what they want for themselves and one another. In these actions we see how the existing movement evolved into new spaces amplifying different voices and shining light on the ways in which the fight for reproductive rights also includes girls and young feminists.

> *To Milagros, wearing the green scarf on her backpack is a political act. Even more for adolescents or girls, because that usually creates discomfort with certain people at school or in the street. Adults tend to react and say: "why are you wearing that scarf? Or, if you don't know anything about it, first learn to take care of yourself. You don't know anything!" It is also a political act to have collective spaces for and by girls. That's why in 2017, the girls who frequently met at the marches decided to get together. They organised spaces to discuss different topics and, with time, they formed the feminist collective: "Las Wuachas Sororas." They used the word guachas because they wanted to reclaim girlhood as a political subject which is why they changed the G to a W"*
>
> - Milagros, Stories of Girls Resistance.

Young feminists have even managed to bring the conversation into spaces historically dominated by patriarchy, such as football stadiums. There was a historic occupation of Arsenal Stadium by thousands of young feminists, girls, and families who supported the Argentine women's national football team in their match to qualify for the World Cup. At the game, a sea of green handkerchiefs cheered on the team with feminist chants and support, demonstrating how intertwined feminist struggles are and the various possible scenarios for making them visible."
– Juliana Roman Lozano, Argentina/Colombia, Feminist Football Activist

Ultimately, girls and young feminists have and continue to play a central and important role in the social change that has occurred across Latin America as a result of the Green Wave; laws have shifted and access to safe and legal abortion has expanded. The organised approach taken by the movement of consistency, creativity, and clear messaging has also sent a powerful message; as long as there are places in which abortion remains inaccessible, the Green Wave will continue to flow and grow and with that a feminist Latin America will rise.

Writing and Reflection Prompts for Reproductive Rights and Bodily Autonomy Case Study:

- **List the various ways girls mobilised in this study.** What were some of the strategies used that were unique to girls and young feminists or/and were sparked because of the involvement of girls and young feminists?
- **What was the role of integrational organising in this case study?** How did girls and young feminists make advancements at a key moment during a long term fight for reproductive freedom.
- **What does this case study tell us about the long-term nature of movements?** How can this inform how funders and others in positions of formal power resource and support movements over time?
- **Describe the various dimensions** of intersectionality girls are experiencing in this case study.
- **What was the wider systemic impact** in this case study?
- **Describe the various dimensions** of intersectionality girls experience in this case study.

Learn more about this movement:

- Yael Crupnicoff, "How Young Women in Argentina Won the Fight to Legalize Abortion," Assembly, April 14, 2021.
- Ana Muñoz Padrós, "Inside Argentina's Revolution of the Daughters," Ms., June 20, 2018.
- Ofelia Fernández, "Argentine Feminists Are About to Win the Fight for Abortion Rights," Jacobin, December 29, 2020.
- Jessica Carvalho Morris, "Five Lessons from Argentina's Feminist Movements' Fight for Legal Abortions," open Democracy, June 9, 2021.
- Ngozi Cole, "How Feminists Are Organizing for Abortion Rights in Latin America," Women's Media Center, November 19, 2018.
- Rebeca Ramos, "Winning the Fight for Reproductive Rights in Mexico," Open Society Foundations, February 15, 2024.
- "Denisse: Nicaragua," Stories of Girls' Resistance, 2023.
- "Germana: Bolivia," Stories of Girls' Resistance, 2023.

Feminist Power: Intergenerational Organising and the Role of Adults Allies

Intergenerational Organising and the Role of Adult Allies

Throughout the case studies we see the importance of intergenerational organizing across movements; the role of adult allies in supporting girls' power to demand for change and the role of girls and young feminists in bringing bold, brave, and creative strategies and new ways of organising to movements. Across movements such as the Green Wave, girls and young feminists are organising with and alongside people of all ages, bringing unique strategies and tactics. In movements that are sparked, driven, and led by girls to address something that uniquely impacts them—such as the fight for radical inclusion in school policies—adult allies play a critical role in supporting girls to access formal power holders. Adult allies open doors and make critical introductions, ensure girls have a meaningful role at tables where decisions are being made, and help girls access the resources and support they need to advance their agendas. Girl- and young feminist-led movements sometimes grow out of adult-led movements and sometimes girls remain organising within adult infrastructures.

Intergenerational relationships can be complex and fraught because of the inherent power imbalances related to age and the scarcity of resources for movements; they can be nourishing, healing, and critical in advancing movements, they can also be harmful, toxic, and the source of ruptures in movements. There is often too little focus on supporting intergenerational spaces or an active invisibalisation of the role of intergenerational organizing. This can look like an erasure of the role girls and young feminists play across movements or the invisibility of the role of adults in girl-led movements. There is a need for intentional investment in intergenerational movement building and for further documentation needed to understand these dynamics.

Reflection questions on the Power and Role of Girls and Young Feminists Across Movements:

- **You have now read three case studies** that articulate the role of girls and young feminists in social movements:
- **Write down three similarities** you see across these case studies.
- **Write down three different strategies** you see girls and young feminists use across these case studies?
- **In reflecting on the case studies, what different roles did adult allies play?** Where did you identify girls and young feminists bringing new energy and creative strategies to their organising across movements for social change?
- **In reflecting on the case studies, what do you see as the role of funders?** How does better understanding movements and the role of girls and young feminists in movements inform how funders and other people in positions of formal power can resource and support movements? What kinds of resources and support structures do girls and young feminists need for their activism?

Stories of Girls' Resistance Spotlights: From individual moments of resistance to organising across social movements

The Stories of Girls' Resistance is the largest ever collection of oral and narrative history of adolescent girls' activism. A foundational initiative dedicated to documenting a true recount of history grounded in the role of girls' and young feminists' resistance across social movements and geographies.

While the collection, being the first of its kind, documents the individual stories of girls and young feminists activists across the world. It solidifies the fact that girls and young feminists have always been, are, and will continue to be essential to social movements despite historical efforts to ignore or erase their contributions.

In this section, we spotlight three stories to illustrate their individual journeys and their intrinsic connections to broader social movements.

Intersectional Fights: Education Feminist and Disability Rights Movementss

Elizabeth Patricia Pérez
Mexico

> *We hierarchise the differences to see who can do more than the other. And those who can't, we minimise them, we exclude them. We don't see these differences as complementary. That is structural violence."*

Elizabeth Patricia Pérez (Eli) is an Indigenous feminist Mexican disability rights activist and human rights defender that works as a writer and community organiser. She is the founder and president of Amor Sin Fronteras and part of the National Feminist Disability Network in Mexico (Red Femidisca). She has written multiple articles about disability at the intersection of gender, social movements, politics, love, family, and COVID. Through her poetic-political narrative, Eli shares her journey of breaking from the binaries in life, not everything is white, not everything is black. She honours her journey to sustain and fight for herself and her right to education and ensuring its access, claiming her power and her freedom. And highlights the support she has provided and has received from her community, creating "shared resilience." This story of resistance, originally featured in Our Resistance, is documented in a poetic political narrative style, an ancestral oral practice that has existed for hundreds of years across various territories and cultures. It is a powerful way to document, share, and preserve life, wisdom, and history through our own words.

A panda,
not everything is black, not everything is white,
as contradictory as life.
These colours for me represent strength,
vulnerability,
our light and shadows.

Strength and vulnerability,
Are important components in every movement,
for every person.

A panda, or as I called it: pachoncito,
meant a lot of sisterhood,
a lot of empathy.

Not everything is black, not everything is white.
Since I was a child, I started to realise it:
my life was not just hospitals,
I also had joy.
The panda bear reminds me of my dad,
a visit to Mexico City,
the Chapultepec Zoo,
Oh, the panda bears!
At that time I was able to see.

I also remember an economic crisis.
On my birthday my dad said:
"I can't buy you the big gifts;
but I have this for you."
It was a little panda bear,
I keep it forever.

I have been in hospitals since I was a child.
Whenever I felt like I couldn't anymore,
My dad would say to me: "everything is going to be fine."
I have held to that saying.
Life itself has led me to understand
that everything is going to be fine.
From where I am in life right now,
my strength,
those of my ancestors,
and of my parents,
in spite of the struggles of my family,
today I am grateful of their ways,
they pushed me.

My strength has also taught me to defend myself,
being the only female of four siblings.
Being able to use my strength to defend myself has also played in other scenarios:
fighting for my education,
and Labour.
And it is my voice,
who knows that it is important to defend herself,
because no one can describe what I have experienced.

Our voice is strength,
no one better than ourselves understands what we have lived,
and we must be part of the spaces to put on the table.

My voice is always present when faced with situations of violence,
Within me, I listen:
"Eli, you can get out of this.
You can grab your cane and get out of this situation."

My inner voice says: "you can do it."
It is always there,
there is always doubt,
uncertainty.
And, at the same time that courage.
This inner voice also tells me:
"this moment is going to pass."
This voice helps me,
reminds me to breathe.
Breathing in the sense of
"I am alive,
this is going to pass
and I will find the tools to overcome what I am going through".

I also believe in the power of support networks,
in those other voices that have accompanied me along the way.
Without those other voices,
we cannot know ourselves,
we cannot see for ourselves.
We need one another,
we sustain each other.

In our case, for those who have a disability,
it's not easy to get out there,
to live in a system made to exclude us,
in a world where our rights are violated,
where there is barely any space for us to learn and be together.

Today in the morning I remembered a song
"Breaking through, overcoming fear."
by Paulina Goto.
I remembered freedom,
the freedom we are looking for,
freedom for all women living with any type of disability,
my own inner freedom that I seek on a daily basis,
to break my own fears,
learned fears,
break the taboos that encapsulate us,
that try to contain us.

Freedom,
I was always unknowingly looking for her;
five years ago I started training in sexuality,
and it dawned on me:
What has happened to me that I do not dare to live my full self, exploring other parts of who I am? From other experiences?

Social structure, and family implicitly told me:
"you can't."
"you can't live yourself from your body,
you can't live your sexuality,
you can't go out on the street alone,
you can't."

I'm starting to get the hang of it
that I have a body,
my own sensations.
That I am allowed to feel,
to be free!

When I write my autobiography,
reflecting what have I done with my life,
I have done things that contribute to society
but...on the personal side:
I have yet to turn around and see myself;
To connect with that inner freedom,
the one that makes me challenge my fears,
letting go of the:
"don't wear that"
"don't come out with that."

The freedom to live in my body has comes from the wisdom of teachers, allies, colleagues,
and myself.
We have learned how to overcome it,
learned that we are not the only ones,
learned that there are other ways of being,
other ways of living.
Life is trial and error.
We are all full and rich bodies,
I have my body,
I inhabit my body,
it is my body,
and I have full autonomy over my body.

With my body,
I had to learn to use a white cane,
allowed myself to explore,
leave the house,
walking the obstacles on the streets,
life;

And in the absence of my eyes,
I developed listening skills,
touch,
connecting with myself,
And how to reach out and ask for the support I need.
my feet have learned to feel, what my eyes no longer see,
feel from my skin.

And from my activism,
In Femidiscas
a network that emerges because of the pandemic,
a group of powerful women from different parts of the Mexico,
connected to question and explore the world, focusing on
gender perspectives,
inclusion,
And, what it all means?

At our first meeting,
it was shocking to learn that I was not the only one.
To connect with this collective of us by us.
To have a rooting of non-judgement,
to respect our time,
our feelings,
And understand that activism has many approaches,
and all are valid and valued,
for us is cyberactivism.
The spaces allow us to say:
"today it's our turn to cuddle"
through listening, laughing, crying together.

We question patriarchal models,
Systems,
'experts.'
From virtual spaces, because our own conditions prevent us from being able to participate in the streets,
where our voices are not heard
where the structures do not welcome us.
Having our activism in virtual spaces is a political stance,
a disability-focused stance.

What does being inclusive really mean?
The usual discourse that we are all involved and participating is not true
Hey, here we are!
from our beds due to illness,
or because of a disability,
We can contribute, we know and have.

I began to lose my vision when I was one and a half.
Today, I can call myself a blind woman.
At the time my parents told me:
"you are no longer going to study"
But then there was a shift:
"you're going to have a 100 percent scholarship to study.
pedagogy or psychology;
the only condition: learn braille
I said to myself: "In San Cristobal, I could learn Braille?"

My dad and I went to buy a ruler,
an awl,
and with my self-created alphabet,
I taught myself braille.

I knew that Chiapas had to have a space,
in San Cristobal,
a space that would provide attention to visually impaired people.
Since 2016 with Love without borders,
an organisation supporting women with disabilities from indigenous communities.
I have been walking with the support of volunteers,
And teaching other children Braille.
We are the only organisation that teaches Braille in San Cristobal,
Creating shared resilience for people with disabilities.

Shared resilience is power
It makes us become each other allies,
allies from the heart.

At Femidiscas and Amor Sin Fronteras all that we have done
is without a peso [funds],
without economic or technological resources,
yet we have done so much.

We need more flexibility in funding,
more economic resources.
We have the creativity,
the wisdom,
the experience.

We need to be seen,
to be heard.
We expand the mind
and open the heart.

An Overdue Call for Justice: Centre Dalit Rights and Trans Rights Movements

> *It's not the power, it's a role. I have a different role as a trans mother, as an activist, as a writer, as a Dalit person. I want to create the platform for the future generations for a safe environment."*

Grace is an Indian software engineer who is a Dalit and transgender activist. She was the first transgender person to be admitted to an engineering college in the state of Tamil Nadu. Grace's story was documented as a part of the Stories of Girls' Resistance collective and was brought to life through visual arts by Everystory Sri Lanka.

Grace was born in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, and she belongs to the Dalit community, one of India's most oppressed and marginalised groups. Grace grew up knowing discrimination well, but this would only be the beginning because she realised she was both Dalit and transgender as she grew.

Although everyone treated her like a boy, Grace didn't feel like one. At her boys' school, some of her best times were when she dressed up and danced in cultural performances, sari swirling and anklets tinkling. The boys would cheer as she spun across the stage.

But one day, a relationship with another student was discovered, and she was almost expelled. Grace's mother had fought hard for her to be educated. As a Dalit woman, she knew how vital education was even to begin resisting the oppressions faced by their community. She wasn't going to let her daughter lose her education, so negotiation was had with the headmaster, and he allowed her to return to school on one condition: Grace had to sit outside. The other boy, however, did not. As Grace sat underneath a tree with her books, looking at her schoolmates in the classroom, she wondered: why was only one punished when it takes two to kiss?

Grace's parents eventually sent her to a mental institution. Although she felt female, the doctors insisted she was male. While at the institution, Grace came across the library. Her body might have been detained, but her mind found freedom in the writings of Marx and Ambedkar and now had words to articulate the injustice and discrimination she experienced. But to free herself from the institution, she knew she had to pretend, so she told the doctors she was male.

In the following years, Grace continued her education and was accepted into engineering school. But her experiences had taught her to keep her identity hidden and her head low to stay safe. This did not last for long, and her college mates soon found out. But to her surprise, they were kind. She was accepted, and her friends became her allies. She no longer needed to hide and thus became the first trans woman to be in an engineering college in Tamil Nadu. She went on to find family and allies in the trans community, particularly her trans mother, who continues to support her identity and determination to live her life authentically.

Grace is now a leading trans activist. She's worked with the government to arrange housing and loans for 30 trans people to set up a milking business; this is India's first dairy farm run by trans people. She organises and uplifts oppressed communities, works with Muslim, Dalit, and feminist movements, and has written a book on international trans politics in Tamil. Her company, Trans Publishing, hopes to continue her resistance by challenging hierarchies and amplifying trans voices in India.

Bodily Autonomy, Abortion rights, and Feminist Movements

Verónica Vero
Ecuador

> *"There is a lot of violence that you exercise against yourself because you fail to find coherence between who you are, or what you want to be, or what you dream of being as an activist, as a feminist, as a defender of rights – then you are very pressured to be someone that you really are not and to renounce things that at some point you loved and that are not at all bad but that you think that are not consistent with the being that you are beginning to be. I believe that this is one of the first violence that comes from yourself, to repress yourself, to deny and judge yourself a lot; to be very fundamentalist with yourself."*

Verónica Vero is an Ecuadorian feminist with over a decade of experience in sexual and reproductive rights across Latin America, specifically with her role within the right to choose and abortion movement in the region as well as the feminist movement. She emphasised on abortion access that is free, safe, and feminist. Veronica is the executive director of Surkunas, one of the largest feminist organisations in Ecuador working on bodily autonomy. Verónica's story was documented by Paola Cabello Montaño as a part of the Stories of Girls' Resistance collection.

I met Verónica while we studied together in high school. She was one of those classmates who you could not miss. Her clear and sweet eyes balanced her strong voice. She would talk about sexual education with so much comfort. I remember being amazed by her wisdom and the words she used. She spoke about things that I had never heard before.

The first time I paid attention to one of the conversations that Veronica had with her friends, I heard her say: "sexual and reproductive rights." They assigned me homework: research our human rights. I learned about our rights as humans. Still, I didn't find anything about the rights Verónica was talking about. At first, I thought she was teasing her friends. Still, she sounded so sure. During that afternoon, I continued to research to investigate if she was telling the truth.

Veronica has three sisters, one brother, a mother, and a father. Her father was from the Ecuadorian coast and her mother was from Quito. Her relationship with her brother and sisters supported her growth and development, especially her sister Ana. She was the one that got involved in social issues and involved the family. She began her militancy at leftist spaces and women and feminist spaces. She revolutionised her family's life.

She came from generations of powerful women that had been head of the family, very revolutionary in their times. Her grandmother was a professional teacher and faced many difficulties during that time. It was highly unusual for a woman to work, study, and not stay at home. Her grandmother revolutionised Veronica's whole world. She maintained her family's leadership despite the obstacles and her blindness; pulling up her whole family. Listening to her made me understand her confidence and the strength of her actions and convictions.

At the age of 12–13, Veronica participated in the promoting team from the first Consultative Council for the Youth and Child in Ecuador. A space organised by the state. The council consulted girls, boys, teenagers, and young people about public policies that impacted them. They were taught about the children and youth code and learned about their rights. Also, how to read the code and use it as a defence mechanism. Veronica remembers elaborating a plan called "Look at my eyes," which was shared with aspiring candidates for the presidency.

After that experience, Verónica was part of an initiative called Adolescent Ecuador that focused on sexual and reproductive rights. She worked as a teacher for other teenagers on a national level and travelled to meetings and forums during that time.

When she was 14, she organised a protest at her school with her classmates because a pregnant classmate wasn't allowed to graduate with them. They prohibited her from taking the mandatory test and only allowed her to attend school in the afternoons and without a uniform. The school was penalised with a fine and mandated to let the girl take her test and graduate with her classmates, including the church's graduation mass. Everything was supervised by an inspector from the Ministry of Education so he would be able to verify the presence of the girl and compliance of the school. For Veronica, this was her first feminist activism as she was able to see how the rights on the paper translated into reality.

Now, at 30 years of age, Veronica sees herself as a very fortunate person due to all the support she received from her family. She is well aware that not everyone had the same experience or freedom. And recognises the complexities of her experience: "[They want you] as long as you are the young girl who helps them meet their quota. The one who represents them in spaces to show diversity is cool. But when you want to take the lead, have a voice, make your organisation visible, or acquire relevance. They don't like that. There are always disputes about prestige and recognition. Once you reach that point, our presence and participation are no longer required, which turns into a constant fight."

Veronica shared the importance of questioning everything that society has naturalised, of separating the social fight from the feminist organisation and charity. Our starting point should be to recognise our labour and our collective dependence. We cannot achieve any change alone. And we must, in Veronica's words: "Make ourselves uncomfortable and question everything all the time. Feminist activism should not be done from a sacrifice, but joy and transformation."

Centring Our Power Builds Safety: Education Rights, Ending Violence, and Feminist Movements

Mariama Mayealie, a feminist activist and mentor in Sierra Leone, organises girls across her community to build their individual and collective power, their economic power, and transform narratives about girls within the community. Below is an excerpt from a conversation with Mariama in 2024 during a learning series focused on girls' movement building.

As a girl who has experienced violence in my life, I realized if I continue to keep quiet, when I know that I have the power within, knowing that I have a voice to raise, to stand and fight for my colleagues, and also put a stop to how our community is seeing girls. We can do better and have a better future. But I also realized that I cannot do it alone and that I needed to call on people, on girls that have gone through the same violence as me. Because if we come together with the anger in us, if we come together, we can change the world for girls.

So, in 2019, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I called together most of the girls in my community, despite the fact that social gatherings were not allowed. We followed the procedures and protocol of the government. I bought materials and prepared face masks for all of us, made sure we had buckets and soap to wash our hands before entering the space, and followed social distancing. We created a space because we knew if we created a safe space, it would help build our movements, and counter increases in violence that happen during crises. So, we created a space where all of us could come together to talk about things that are affecting girls.

We could not sit back and watch things continue to happen to girls. We needed to take action and put a stop to the way the community perceived us. So we came together every week to talk about things that are affecting girls and we made the space very safe for girls. Girls are free to talk about any issue that they want to talk about and there are people to listen to them and to give them attention. There are people who accept what they say and to assist them in whatever way.

We share our stories and listen to each other's stories because we know there is nobody that can fit into our shoes to tell our stories: we own them and we must tell our stories for people to hear us. So in this space, we tell our stories. And, we use joy as a powerful tool of resistance. We had been doing this for months and we realized that this movement that we are trying to build needed something to keep us going. And what is it? Money.

I was a mentor for Purposeful and they knew about the work that I was doing in my community. Because after creating this movement, and having more girls in this space, we were growing it and many have started

resisting. We live in a community where they force girls into female genital mutilation (FGM) and into child marriages. But because we have come together and started talking about these issues and started resisting, things started changing. If they say I should go for FGM I'll say no because I know I have a right to make a choice. Most of us have younger sisters or girls in the community and because they are seeing us resist, they too will resist.

Purposeful saw our work and supported us with the sum of 10,000 Leons (~500 USD) and we used this money to support our work. In this space, most of us are out-of-school girls so we used this money to start a business and to send girls back to school. We use this money to assist teenage mothers in taking care of their kids and to support them. We started supporting ourselves and the work that we do. And, we understood that we cannot stop with this, we also need to change the way the community sees us.

When community leaders are having meetings, girls are not allowed to join or to say anything because they think girls cannot make decisions. They believe girls should not sit with elders, should not talk to them. So we came back to our space and said, this is the time we'll start taking radical action. We started going to their space when they had meetings to talk about things that are affecting girls. We forced them to listen to us, because most of the time if we complain, they will not see us as people that are existing in the community as they exist; they are used to us being people who are in the back.

But we refuse to be at the back, we want to come to the front, we want to speak and for our voices to be heard. So we go to their space when they have meetings and we talk to them. We let them understand the pain that we feel in the community and how they are treating us in the community. The movement is growing, and girls are resisting. And the money that people supported us with, we are using this for girls beyond our group because there are more girls in our communities, and we do not just center those in the group, but all of us. Girls are going through a lot. We have seen ourselves, this movement; we have seen ourselves as the people that will change the narrative in our community, that will change the stereotypes that are surrounding girls, that will change the patriarchy. That is what we are doing."

It's Time to Step Up: Working with and for Girls and Young Feminists

Despite the critical role girls and young feminists are playing across movements and sectors, they remain deeply underfunded and invisible to power holders across movements, sectors, and issues. Only 1.9 percent of all charitable donations in the US are made to organizations dedicated to women and girls and less than 1 percent or less of global overseas development assistance (ODA) funding supports adolescent or youth-led work. Black feminist social movements globally get even less—research in 2023 found that less than 0.5 percent of all philanthropic funding went to Black feminist organizing and 53 percent of Black feminist organizations do not have funding for the next fiscal year.

These case studies demonstrate unequivocally that girls' and young feminists' visions, strategies, and tactics are contributing to social change efforts across the world.

- **What would it look like if girls' and young feminists' efforts were supported with robust, flexible resources?**
- **What if their stories were household stories and their strategies and power were centred across movements and sectors?**
- **What would the world look like, feel like, and be, if we supported girls' and young feminists' resistance, power, and dreams?**
- **What would become possible across movements?**

Imagine this for a moment: the world that is waiting on the other side.

Imagine the possibilities when we step up.

What are we waiting for?

Girls' Power
Learning Institute

The Girls' Power Learning Institute provides accompaniment to formal power holders on how to meaningfully build, support, and resource girls' power.