

Girls And Girlhood:

Resisting, Building,
And Dreaming New Worlds



Girls' Power
Learning Institute

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

Note →

All words bolded in **Purple** are included in the accompanying Shared Language glossary.

Girls and Girlhood: Resisting, building, and dreaming new worlds

Developed in 2024 with the foundational collection and analysis provided by the Stories of Girls' Resistance

Co-written by Ayat Mneina, Dr. Tana Forrest, Jody Myrum, and Laura Vergara

Peer reviewed and contributions by Anna Windsor, Ayat Mneina,

Boikanyo Modungwa, Juliana Román Lozano, Juliana Vélez, and Priyanka Samy

Copyedited by Rasmieyh Abdelnabi

Designed by Alike Creative with artwork from Shreya Gupta and Vidushi Yadav

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)

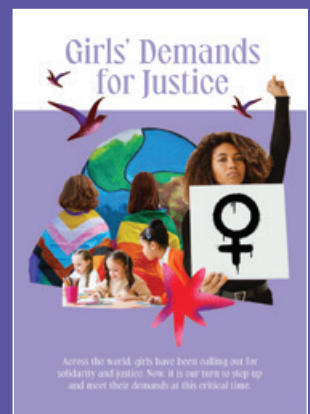
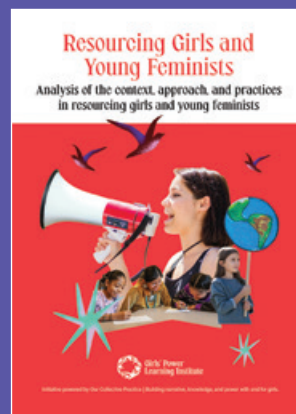
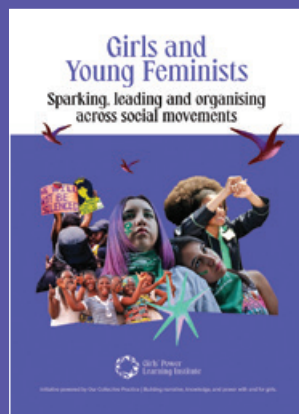
Provides an understanding of philanthropy and the current state of funding for girls and young feminists, while highlighting key recommendations and best practices for effectively resourcing them. This booklet moves from understanding the contributions of girls and young feminists in social change to 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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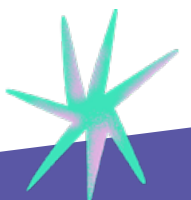
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Defining Girls and Girlhood

Girls are talked about and around, yet too often not centred or part of the conversation.

When **girls** and **girlhood** are defined, it is rarely with language that truly reflects their realities, stories, experiences, or strategies. Instead, these terms are presented in constrained, technical frameworks that generalise and flatten their identities and lived experiences. Governmental and educational organisations, popular culture, and even human rights and social justice mandates frequently fail to offer nuanced or comprehensive definitions of girls. Instead, they group them with other populations, effectively rendering them invisible rather than acknowledging them as vital and critical members of society.

Language, in how and by who it is defined, holds immense power in shaping the world we live in. It influences our understanding, behaviors, and practices across communities, transcending contexts and moments. Current systems and structures operate—both consciously and unconsciously—through **dominant narratives** that are ingrained as “mainstream” or “common” narratives that influence culture, policies, and societal norms. Dominant narratives tend to reflect the values, beliefs, and interests of those who hold and hoard “formal” power, while erasing and ignoring the experiences, struggles, and contributions of marginalised communities. These narratives are strategically constructed to maintain control and reinforce a specific status quo—hence, the term “dominant” is rooted in the concept of domination. Historically, dominant narratives have been employed to create and legitimise ideologies that serve particular political, economic, and social purposes, often with the goal of securing power and economic gain for the few at the expense of the many.

“*Language is a slippery tool for the master’s house ... The state’s narrative contortions existed well before contemporary iterations of facism.*” – Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan, Tamil Activist, Writer, and Scholar, [The Garret](#)



For girls specifically, dominant narratives frequently define them in ways that uphold oppressive systems. Girls are often portrayed as vulnerable, passive, or in need of saving, with their bodies and lives denied agency and autonomy. 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 by extension, the systemic nature required of the solutions to change their circumstances. These portrayals diminish girls' power and potential, reinforcing injustices that deny their rights. Oppressive systems fear girls as they represent possibilities, future, and liberation—making girls threats to their very existence.

Reclaiming Language, Reclaiming Narratives

To challenge these oppressive structures, we must take an intentional approach to **narrative change**—reclaiming narratives in ways that centre girls' power and experiences, starting with defining and redefining "girl" and "girlhood." Thus, in this booklet, and on the learning journey to centre and support girls power, we embark on a process of both accountability and mutual learning. The [Girls' Power Learning Institute's](#) Shared Language resource was developed as an evolving glossary to accompany each booklet, expanding on how we are defining specific terms and frameworks.

“*Narrative change is a political act to reclaim our narratives. It is a process through which marginalised communities, particularly girls and young feminists, seize control over the stories and language used to describe their identities, struggles, and experiences. Historically, narratives about girls and women, especially those from oppressed communities, have been written by those in power—perpetuating stereotypes, erasing their agency, and framing them as passive victims. Reclaiming narratives is a radical act of resistance and empowerment, enabling girls and young feminists to define themselves on their own terms, tell their own stories, and challenge dominant discourses that seek to confine or control them. It is through reclaiming narratives that they can articulate their visions for justice, challenge harmful systems, and transform societal perceptions.*” – Priyanka Samy, Dalit Feminist Activist

Our Working Definitions of Girl and Girlhood

Girl: A child or young person who identifies as female, encompassing both cisgender and transgender female-identifying individuals. The term “girl” typically refers to those under 19 years old, representing a spectrum of phases and experiences influenced by factors such as age, race, and socio-economic and political contexts. It’s crucial to acknowledge that non-binary individuals may relate to aspects of girlhood at various points in their lives without it defining their entire identity. Moreover, “girl,” like “race,” is a social construct, shaped by identities and systems that uphold particular norms. Thus, a critical part of centring girls and their stories, experiences, power, and dreams is to focus on how they seek to define and shape girlhood.

Girlhood: The period of life defined by being a girl and forming relationships with other girls, children, young people, and the communities—along with the presence or absence of resources—that shape one’s vision and understanding of the world. Girlhood is profoundly influenced by political and socio-economic contexts and is often marked by experiences of violence and injustice. Many girls are prematurely forced into adulthood—a process described by [Palestinian scholars as Unchilding](#) and recently termed [adultification](#). This shift occurs when girls shoulder caregiving, economic, and labor responsibilities typically associated with adults or when their childhood ends abruptly due to criminalisation, violence, or life-threatening conditions that jeopardize their very existence.

“I don’t know if I have a really bad memory, but I think my resistance was so subtle that I don’t recollect. Because, if you’ve noticed, it’s a bit hazy when it comes to girlhood because I’ve always been this way. It sounds crazy but I don’t even remember a moment, because in subtle ways, I was always resisting.” – Ulemu, Malawi, [Stories of Girls’ Resistance](#)

“Girlhood is not just a process that you go through, it’s a community.” – Krystal, Jamaica, [Stories of Girls’ Resistance](#)

Framing of girls and young feminists: It is important to emphasize that girls and young feminists work collaboratively across spaces, communities, and movements; learning from and supporting one another’s shared agendas and dreams. However, “girls” and “young feminists” do not refer to the same group of people. Girls are generally those under 19 years old, while young feminists are primarily under 30 years old. This framing is neither rigid nor prescriptive but serves to underscore the distinction. Its purpose is to ensure that girls and their contributions are not lumped in as an afterthought but are instead recognised and valued in their own right. Drawing this distinction also helps us understand the unique needs of girls and the importance of ensuring they are supported, resourced, and part of decision-making processes.

“Oftentimes, organisations name ‘girls and young feminists,’ yet their funding structures overwhelmingly prioritise those aged 20-35, effectively excluding girls from critical resources and decision-making spaces. This exclusion is not accidental—it reflects systemic biases that undermine girls’ agency and power. By co-opting language without shifting power or resources, we end up reinforcing the very injustices that keep marginalising girls.” – Juliana Vélez, Colombia/USA, Resourcing Practitioner & Advocate



While the shifting social, cultural, and historical contexts of the “child” presented me with difficulties in coming up with a disciplinary definition, the “child”—as a category—did not totally [jive] with my own research, which focuses on social and cultural constructions of girls and girlhoods (see Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz; Pomerantz). While the “girl” is subsumed under the word “child,” girls are rarely seen within the parameters of this term. In many bodies of literature, particularly anthropology and sociology, the “child” is gender-less, sex-less, and desire-less, leaving no room for a discussion of girls, or gender as it intersects with race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. And in other bodies of literature, particularly classic cultural studies and popular media accounts, the term “youth” tends to refer to young men (McRobbie), rendering girls virtually invisible as participants in or creators of youthful cultural practices (Kearney). So, while girls are indeed children, they are also constructed through

distinct social, cultural, and historical trajectories that make the “girl” a unique entity from the “child.” While the same could be said for the “boy,” during the early twenty-first century, girls have become an “incitement to discourse,” whereby they have been obsessively written about and represented as in trouble and out of control (Pomerantz). Such moral panics include the “mean girl” crisis (Fey; Simmons), the Ophelia complex (Pipher), and the girls-gone-wild syndrome (Levy; Hardwicke), to name but a few. As a result, girls have endured an enormous amount of surveillance, bad press, and negative labelling, making deconstructive interventions crucial in order to counterbalance the harmful effects of this discursive formation on girlhood (Kelly and Pomerantz).

[Excerpt from “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Un/Defining the ‘Girl’” by Shauna Pomerantz](#)

For Further Learning

- Shauna Pomerantz, [“Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Un/Defining the ‘Girl’”](#), *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, 2009.
- Nimmi Gowrinathan, [The Garret](#), 2023.



Reflection and Writing Questions

- **Reflect on the societal definitions of girls and girlhood.** How are these definitions constructed and by whom? How do they influence perceptions and treatment of girls within different social, cultural, physical, and economic contexts?
- **Consider how narratives about girlhood influence broader social attitudes and norms.** In what ways do these narratives reinforce or challenge existing power dynamics and inequalities?
- **How do you, those around you, and various sectors of society define girls and girlhood differently?** What factors contribute to these differing definitions, and what implications do they have for the experiences and opportunities available to girls?
- **Explore the relationship between societal definitions of girlhood and the development of laws, policies, and programs affecting girls’ lives.** How do these definitions shape the priorities and approaches of policymakers and stakeholders?
- **Create a bullet list encompassing the array of words through which you define girls and girlhood.** Embrace the imperfection of the framing, acknowledging that definitions are fluid and continuously moulded by personal experiences, understandings, and reflections. Keep this list accessible and keep adding and editing as you continue to read and explore the booklet.

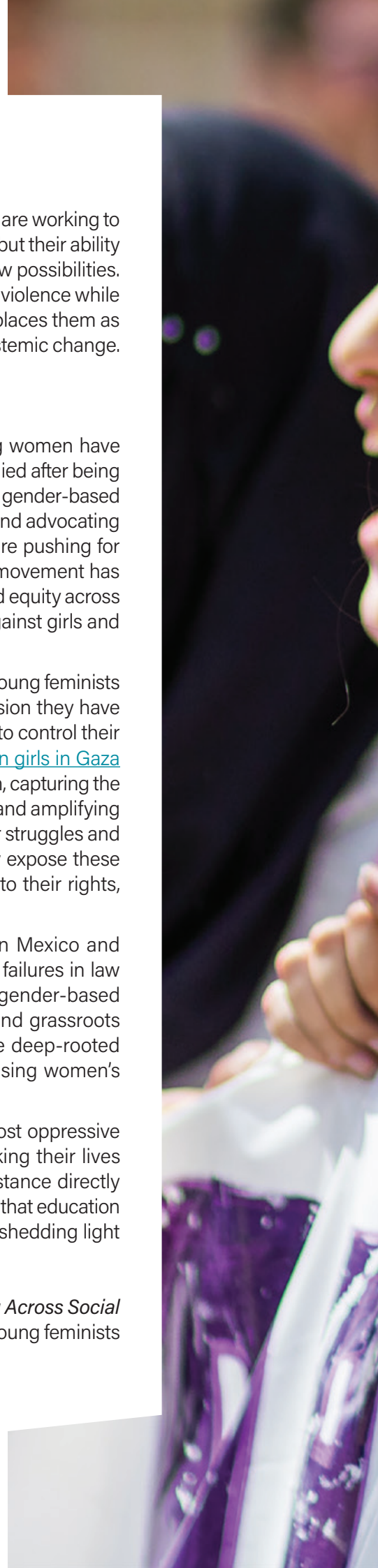
Why Girls?

Girls and young feminists continue to spark movements across the globe that are working to dismantle oppressive systems. Their power arises not just from their activism but their ability to challenge entrenched norms, construct power structures, and imagine new possibilities. Girls and young feminists navigate simultaneously deep marginalisation and violence while resisting and working to build new worlds. This experience and knowledge places them as some of the most profound teachers on how to navigate and bring about systemic change.



For instance:

- **Protesting the killing of Mahsa Amini in Iran:** Iranian girls and young women have been at the forefront of protests demanding justice for Mahsa Amini, who died after being detained by the morality police. Their activism highlights systemic issues of gender-based oppression and state-sanctioned violence. By demanding accountability and advocating for the dismantling of patriarchal laws and governance structures, they are pushing for comprehensive political reform and greater gender equality in Iran. This movement has also become a transnational effort, connecting with struggles for justice and equity across the globe, amplifying solidarity and shared resistance against violence against girls and women's bodies, autonomy, and lives.
- **Documenting Crimes and Ongoing Genocide in Palestine:** Girls and young feminists in Palestine have been courageously documenting crimes of the oppression they have faced from a settler-colonial, apartheid, racist, military apparatus seeking to control their bodies, mind, and ancestral land. In the midst of the genocide, [Palestinian girls in Gaza](#) have been at the forefront of journalistic reporting and crime documentation, capturing the systemic violence inflicted on their communities. By preserving evidence and amplifying their stories to a global audience, they challenge narratives that erase their struggles and demand accountability for human rights violations. Their efforts not only expose these crimes but also serve as a powerful act of resistance and commitment to their rights, collective memory, and dignity as a community.
- **Ending femicide in Mexico and Kenya:** Girls and young feminists in Mexico and Kenya are driving movements to combat femicide, challenging systemic failures in law enforcement, judiciary processes, and cultural norms that perpetuate gender-based violence. Through public demonstrations, advocacy for legal reforms, and grassroots organising, they are forcing governments and societies to confront the deep-rooted misogyny that enables such violence and to implement policies prioritising women's and girls' safety and rights.
- **Defying the Taliban's strict laws in Afghanistan:** Under one of the most oppressive regimes for women and girls, Afghan girls and young feminists are risking their lives to attend secret schools and fight for their right to education. Their resistance directly challenges the Taliban's systemic oppression, sending a powerful message that education is non-negotiable. Their defiance also galvanises international advocacy, shedding light on the broader need to protect and prioritise girls' education globally.

Read booklet *Girls and Young Feminists: Sparking, Leading, and Organising Across Social Movements* to learn more about the role, strategies, and impact of girls and young feminists in dismantling oppressive structures to bring about systemic change.







While girls are at the forefront of movements and social change, their resistance should never be a prerequisite for their existence.


Girls everywhere deserve to live in freedom, safety, and dignity. Yet, for the vast majority, this right is denied. Simply being young and female often places them at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, making all girls vulnerable to violence and discrimination. Moreover, the compounding effects of structural inequalities—including class, race, caste, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration or citizenship status, marital status, and disability—intensify exclusion and harm. Together, these intersecting oppressions perpetuate cycles of marginalisation and prevent many girls from realising their inherent rights to safety, dignity, and freedom.

Girls' marginalisation peaks during their adolescent years. At the onset of puberty, adolescent girls experience increased gender discrimination, which often leads to her world and opportunities shrinking. This heightened marginalisation stems from patriarchal institutions' intensified efforts to control girls' burgeoning sexuality and enforce social and sexual norms of femininity. [This period represents a critical juncture when authority figures fear losing control over a girl's sexuality.](#) In their minds, practices like child marriage serve as a method of safeguarding girls from perceived external threats. For girls, however, these socio-cultural controls manifest in a lack of meaningful choices across many aspects of life, limiting not only the options they are offered but also the choices they can imagine for themselves. This can result in the withdrawal from, expulsion, or being pushed out of school, increased work and home responsibilities of adults, loss of peer support, increased social isolation, pressure for early and forced marriage, and elevated risk of sexual violence.

However, this is far from the whole story. While girls face profound challenges at the intersections of age and gender, they are also immensely powerful. They refuse to passively accept these realities and are actively pushing back—in their homes, families, communities, countries, and on the global stage—fighting for a world where this status quo no longer holds. Reclaiming their rights and the protection that comes with knowing and understanding their power is an important route to creating real, embedded, long-term transformational change—for girls and for the world.



Each year, [12 million girls are married before the age of 18, and, currently, there are 650 million women globally who were married before reaching the age of 18.](#)



Globally, [129 million girls are out of school, comprising 32 million of primary school age and 97 million of secondary school age.](#)



Approximately [15 million adolescent girls \(aged 15 to 19\) worldwide have experienced forced sex at some point in their lives.](#)





For Further Learning

- Ayat Mneina, "[Can We Build a Future Where Girlhood Is Protected?](#)" Our Collective Practice, April 14, 2024.
- "[The World Is Failing Girls and Women, According to New UN Report](#)," UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, September 7, 2023.
- Jemimah Njuki and Carla Kraft, "[How Conflict Drives Hunger for Women and Girls](#)," SDG Action, March 22, 2024.



Reflection and Writing Questions

- **Upon reading "Why Girls?,"** what emotions, thoughts, and observations arise for you? How do these reactions shape your understanding of the topic?
- **The above section provides some context but is not complete.** What would you add to this framing when you think about "Why Girls?" for you?
- **How does it resonate with reflections on your own girlhood or girlhood** for other girls in your family and community?
- **Based on your experiences of girlhood or within your community,** can you identify or imagine the most common spaces, places, or opportunities from which girls are often excluded or pushed out?

Girls On The Frontlines Of Social Change

To be a girl is to live on the frontline of injustices, enduring profound vulnerability, and being relegated to society's margins. But we also know that 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 common feature of girls' and young feminists' **activism** is their pursuit of making the world better, not just their own lives or that of their immediate communities. The pursuit of gender justice therefore lives both comfortably and logically alongside many other social justice struggles. While they often focus on issues that are more obviously tied to their lived experiences—such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, education, ensuring access to sports, and ending gender-based violence and discrimination—they also lead, spark, and contribute to broader **social justice movements** that deeply impact their lives and communities. Many of these movements, while profoundly influenced by girls and young feminists, are not always credited to them. Yet their activism drives key social justice efforts, including climate justice, racial justice, anti-war movements, food sovereignty, land and water rights, LGBTQI rights, immigrant rights, and more. By actively participating in and leading these movements, girls and young feminists demonstrate a profound understanding of how systems operate, the interconnections of injustices, and develop innovative solutions that drive progress in ways that are creative, relevant, and effective. A mere scan of history books and present day headlines begins to reveal snapshots and traces of stories of girl activists, leaders, culture shapers, and movement makers through the ages and today.

“*Girls are not just resisting oppression, they are actively reimagining and rebuilding the world around them. Girls' power lies not only in their resistance but in their radical creativity to envision new realities beyond the systems of patriarchy, exploitation, and violence. They are not merely fighting to survive within broken systems, they are cultivating entirely new ways of thinking, being, and organising that challenge the very foundation of oppressive structures.*

Girls are creating networks of solidarity, building movements that centre care, collective liberation, and mutual aid, rejecting the individualistic, patriarchal notion of power that seeks to dominate. Their activism is inherently intersectional, addressing climate justice, racial justice, economic inequality, and more—all from their lived experience at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. By centring girls in the fight for justice, we are not just protecting the most vulnerable—we are amplifying the transformative leadership that has the potential to reshape our world into one grounded in equity, dignity, and true freedom for all.” – Priyanka Samy, Dalit Feminist Activist

Through both small and large efforts, their collective actions create far-reaching ripple effects. With creativity, courage, and energy, girls are transforming the world and sustaining efforts to dismantle systemic oppression and violence. Yet, the differentiated and racialized ways that girls are represented in media and society—such as the dominant portrayals of white girl activists and organisers from the Global North compared to the representations of Black, Afro-descendant, Indigenous, Dalit, or Global South girl activists and organisers—underscore the need for a critical power analysis. These representations reflect and reinforce societal hierarchies, shaping whose voices are amplified and whose struggles are made invisible.



Reflection and Writing Questions

- **How does this narrative about girls and young feminists resonate with your own experience?** Think about any young activists who you've met over the years. What issues did they care about and what movements were they a part of?
- **Contemplate the significance of girls being at the forefront of social change.** What emotions, thoughts, and reflections arise within you when considering the role of girls in activism? How does their activism make you feel, both personally and in relation to broader societal dynamics?
- **After reading "[When Girls Erupt](#)," what key reflections come to mind** on the role of girls in questioning and challenging injustices?
- **Consider the dominant narratives that exist about girls by formal power holders;** for example, the narrative behind "the Girl Effect" (teen girls have the unique potential to stop poverty before it starts) or girls as vulnerable subjects or victims passively awaiting someone to help them, or a singular girl hero that arises out of nowhere and saves the day—how are you seeing these narratives driving funding and policy change efforts? Try to write out the narratives and connect them to funding strategies you've seen.
- **The narrative in this section reflects the lived experiences of girls and young feminists, built on stories that are often ignored, sidelined, or erased.** Reflect on what would happen if funders and other formal policy holders instead resourced and supported this narrative?

For Further Learning

- *Girls and Young Feminists: Sparking, Leading and Organising Across Social Movements*, Girls' Power Learning Institute, 2025.
- Mona Eltahawy, "[When Girls Erupt](#)," Feminist Giant, October 5, 2022.
- Mattie Kahn, [Young and Restless: The Girls Who Sparked America's Revolution](#), 2023.
 - "[At Liberty Podcast: The Revolutionary Power of Teenage Girls](#)," ACLU, March 16, 2023.

Girls Pushed to the Margins: Forgotten And Sidelined



Despite being core members of society and relevant to every issue, movement, and sector, girls are often forgotten or sidelined in programs, policies, and funding strategies that impact their lives. This neglect, erasure, and conscious and unconscious actions are evident across sectors, population-based strategies, and social justice movements.

The multiple forms of oppression faced by girls should create urgency and warrant critical action to position them front and centre in donor priorities and policy agendas. However, they are most likely to be excluded or, when included, only talked about rather than centred in solutions.

Girls also often fall through the cracks of population-focused strategies because they navigate life at the intersections of multiple identities. Programs targeting children frequently lack a gender or power analysis, and as soon as girls reach puberty, they are often no longer considered children. Strategies focusing on women rarely account for the intersection of age, leaving girls excluded from these approaches or forced to fit into models designed for adult women. Similarly, youth-focused strategies often skew towards older ages and, without a gender analysis, default to prioritising boys, who are often easier to reach. This neglect extends to dismissing or undermining the strategies, resources, and spheres where girls' activism and actions for social change thrive—such as informal networks, creative expression, community-based organising, and online spaces—often labelling these as peripheral or lacking impact, despite their critical role in driving systemic change.

This reflects the systemic oppression of **adultism**, which marginalises young people by centring adult perspectives and priorities while devaluing the unique needs, voices, and experiences of children. Adultism intersects with sexism and other forms of oppression, compounding the exclusion and marginalisation of girls. As a result, two scenarios emerge: 1) each sector assumes another is “covering girls,” or 2) girls are named but not meaningfully considered or supported. In both cases, girls are systematically overlooked and underserved.

This holds true across sectoral priorities within development, human rights, and humanitarian sectors, where girls are often overlooked or an afterthought, despite being relevant to all sectors. For instance, [it's estimated that women and children are 14 times more likely to die from a disaster than men](#), likely higher for girls who are at the intersections of these identities, and yet they are rarely centred in disaster response strategies. Despite the disproportionate impact of human rights abuses on Black women, girls and trans people, and the critical role they play in advancing human rights globally, [a recent study found that a mere 5 percent of human rights funding went to Black women, girls, and trans people](#). While the data is not specific to girls, we can extrapolate that a mere fraction of this funding is reaching younger people. Time and time again, girls are left at the whims of overlapping and sometimes competing sectoral perspectives and priorities, including child protection, violence against children, youth work, women's rights, violence against women, and the broader humanitarian and development sectors.

Even within the realm of feminist politics, girls, as “‘the other’ of feminism’s womanhood” (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2009: 4), have been regarded as not sufficiently feminist. As Jessica Taft argues, “Girl activists’ ideas, stories, and theoretical contributions thus remain largely hidden from view. They continue to appear in both the public and academic domain only as occasional images—as visual objects rather than as intelligent and intelligible political subjects” (2011: 5).

This is especially true of girl-driven activist initiatives that do not involve adults. For example, both Anita Harris (2008b) and Jessica Taft (2011) argue that adult-centric notions of what activism should be and where it should occur will often dismiss girls’ activism as generational rebellion rather than serious, meaningful political action, or will problematise girls’ actions as dangerous or inappropriate.

Excerpt from “Making Activism Accessible: Exploring Girls’ Blogs as Sites of Contemporary Feminist Activism” by Jessalynn Keller

When it comes to the incredible role girls and young feminists are playing in advancing movements and social change in communities across the world, girls are perhaps even more invisible, and resourcing and support is even more bleak. Too often, their efforts in transforming the world, their stories and strategies of resistance are erased, co-opted, deeply underfunded, and ignored by power holders across movements, sectors, and issues.

When girls are resourced, most often it is within frameworks that disconnect them from their social and political context and ignore the systemic forces working to strip them of their innate power. As a result, funders and practitioners are missing out on a profound opportunity to support girls to build safe, dignified, joyous, and free lives; and to secure the broader social transformations that happen when girls claim their power.

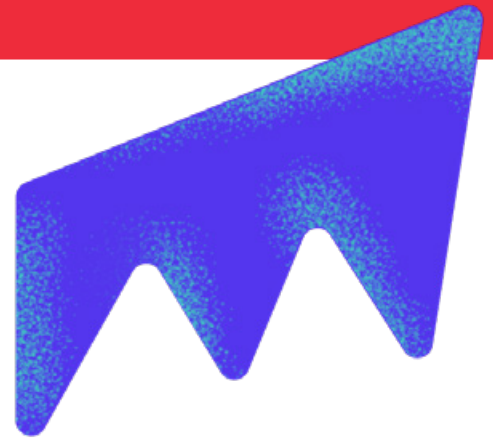
“*Depoliticisation is a calculated strategy—intentionally deployed to maintain patriarchal control and systematically deny girls the agency to lead movements that directly confront and dismantle oppressive power structures. By severing girls from their political power, systems of domination strip them of their agency and capacity to demand deep structural change, reducing their activism to tokenised acts of so-called ‘empowerment’ that pose no real threat to the entrenched status quo. This keeps girls at the margins, ensuring that their radical potential to disrupt and transform power hierarchies remains suppressed.*” – Priyanka Samy, Dalit Feminist Activist



Reflection and Writing Questions

- **What are some of the ways you’ve seen girls forgotten or sidelined** in programs, policies, and funding strategies that impact their lives?
- **What are the arguments you’ve used to bring girls from the margins to the centre?** What has worked and where have these arguments fallen short?
- **How do adult-centric notions of activism hinder the recognition and support of girl-driven efforts,** both in terms of funding and the resources available to them?
- **How has the exclusion or marginalisation** of girls’ history and contributions from narratives of social change and society impacted the injustices they face?

What About The Boys?



"As a longtime champion of girls' rights, I've spoken many times about the importance of giving more girls around the world the education they deserve. And one of the first questions I almost always hear is some variation of 'What about the boys?' How, they ask, do we ensure boys' needs aren't ignored or diminished when we make special efforts to educate girls? In order to bring about better outcomes for girls, don't we need to change the minds of boys and men first? I now have a standard answer. I've just spent a lot of time detailing the structural and systematic exclusion of a largely marginalised and often vulnerable population.

So why are you still only interested in the empowered group?"

– Chernor Bah, Minister of Information and Civic Education
of Sierra Leone and Co-Founder of Purposeful

The question "what about the boys?" emerges in almost every conversation about girls, driven by a number of myths. At its core, this question embodies a form of Whataboutism, often propagated consciously or unconsciously through false narratives and misinformation about girls. As it is evident, through extensive data, the profound, compounded, and deep marginalisation and injustices faced by girls. Whataboutism is a tactic frequently employed to deflect attention from critical issues by redirecting focus or discussion to another issue as if it were in competition when, in reality, it is not.

This tactic is not limited to gender; it mirrors strategies used to sidestep discussions on systemic injustices such as race, casteism, and other intersecting oppressions. In these systems, when marginalised groups fight for justice or equity, dominant groups often invoke false equivalencies, reinforcing structures of power rather than dismantling them.

Additionally, the framing of "What about the boys?" reflects a capitalist logic, as it is inherently a patriarchal framing. The primary concern is to centre a hierarchy of value based on production, where girls are deemed the least important and viewed solely for their potential to produce. As a result, their

needs, stories, and experiences are not prioritised but relegated to secondary status, even though extensive data documents how they are deeply and chronically marginalised by a system structured and designed to do so. Thus, the framing of "What about the boys?" ultimately serves to maintain the status quo, diverting attention away not only from the systemic inequalities faced by girls but any systemic change.

Myth 1: Girls and boys have similar lived experiences and gender is not relevant until they are older.

Fact: Girls often face gender-based discrimination since birth, and in some contexts before birth—at puberty the gender divide widens.

While many children around the world face gender discrimination from a very young age, research shows that the gender divide widens significantly at puberty. Starting around age 12, opportunities for boys expand, while those for girls often contract. In many contexts, boys begin to enjoy new privileges reserved for men, such as greater autonomy, mobility, opportunity, and power—including power over girls' sexual and reproductive lives. Conversely, girls are systematically deprived of their rights and assets, enduring new restrictions typically imposed on women.



This critical juncture also highlights the lack of support for girls navigating puberty, exploring their gender expression, and asserting bodily autonomy. Thus, the onset of puberty is marked by increased surveillance and control over girls' bodies and choices, with little to no investment to support their agency over their bodies and lives. This vacuum of support further entrenches systemic inequities, leaving girls to navigate this transformative phase with inadequate resources.

Compared to boys, twice the number of adolescent girls are not in any form of education, employment, or training. In conflict affected countries, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys.

Further, the obstacles keeping girls from realising their full potential are far greater than those faced by boys, often deeply rooted in societal norms and sometimes even sanctioned by formal policies. For example, norms and laws that do not allow for pregnant girls to attend school or lower minimum age requirements for girls to marry. Addressing the barriers girls face requires a significant level of effort and investment in order to prepare them to face the social, health and violence risks, as well as the economic challenges, that they uniquely face.





Myth 2: If we intentionally focus on girls, boys will suffer.

Fact: Better outcomes for girls benefits everyone in their communities, including boys.

We should support and resource girls because they deserve to live in dignity, safety, and freedom; it is their right and our collective responsibility. Beyond this, it is well-documented that when the well-being of girls and women improves, boys, men, and entire communities benefit. For example, [research estimates that investments of \\$1.53 per day per girl to achieve universal secondary school completion can help developing economies expand their GDP by an average of 10 percent by the year 2030](#). Further, girls are often at the forefront of progressive change, leading movements for justice, equality, and systemic transformation in their communities. Investing in their leadership, power, and activism not only benefits girls, but has a wide reaching impact that benefits their families, communities, and the world. And finally, it is well documented that when systems work for those who are facing the most marginalisation, there is a cascading effect and benefits everyone else in need of those systems.

This is not to say we should not care about the outcomes of boys, but that if we invest in girls experiencing deep poverty, girls with disabilities, pregnant and parenting girls, girls who face ethnic and racial discrimination; if

systems and structures work better for those who face the greatest social, health, and economic risks it *will* benefit all girls, and all boys, and communities at large.

While highlighting the importance of investment in girls and its benefit to the whole community, we must resist framing this investment through the lens of economic production or extractive returns. Too often, oppressive systems measure people's value in terms of their ability to contribute to GDP, labor markets, or societal outputs—standards rooted in colonial legacies that prioritised resource extraction, exploitation of labor, and commodification of bodies. For instance, the transatlantic slave trade and the exploitation of women during colonial expansion illustrate how value was historically tied to economic utility. These practices established frameworks that persist today in policies that prioritise “human capital development” over human dignity.

To truly honour and support girls, we must embrace a decolonial approach—one that inherently seeks to dismantle oppressive structures such as patriarchy, casteism, and ableism—while centring their dignity, safety, and freedom. This approach ensures that their rights are fully respected and that we collectively take responsibility for providing the support and resources they need. It recognises that investing in girls is not about what they can produce or provide but about affirming their rights, humanity, and ability to thrive on their own terms.





Myth 3: Working to change men and boys is the best solution to ending discrimination and violence against girls.

Fact: People with power do not willingly give up power. Building and supporting the power of those who face marginalisation creates a groundswell of urgency that makes it impossible to ignore their calls to action and demands.

While changing the hearts and minds of men and boys is important, allocating the limited resources available for gender equality solely to these efforts is not just misguided, it's also ineffective. When examining lessons from social change across various contexts and times, it becomes evident that systemic injustices are not dismantled by prioritising or centring the voices or leadership of oppressors. Lasting change arises when the resistance, power, vision, leadership, and aspirations of those enduring harm and injustice take precedence. Across history, movements like those led by Dalit activists challenging the caste system and Black communities resisting slavery exemplify how centring those facing marginalisation and oppression supports meaningful change. The system doesn't evolve due to a change of heart among oppressors but rather because alternative avenues become undeniable, and the collective power of the communities facing oppression and marginalisation prevails.

The most impactful way to shift how men and boys view women, girls, and non-binary people, is to demonstrate what is possible when they are resourced and supported to reach their full potential. People who hold power, fear what girls represent; the change, progress, and hope that girls represent for a different future that challenges their power and challenges white supremacy and patriarchy. Many do not want to see this progress and therefore, the only way they will give up power is if they are forced to. By supporting and **building girls' power**, we will see a groundswell of girls demanding their rights and creating a sense of urgency that makes it impossible to ignore their calls to action and demands. Investing in their power is the most effective route to creating real, embedded, long-term transformational change—for girls and for the world.

For Further Learning

- *Girls and Young Feminists Sparking, Leading, and Organising Across Social Movements*, Girls' Power Learning Institute, 2025.
- Cherner Bah, [Girls' Education Is the Global Civil Rights Issue of Our Time](#), *Guardian*, October 11, 2015.



Reflection and Writing Questions

- **How does the question "What about the boys?"** perpetuate systemic inequalities, and what does it reveal about who is being centred in conversations? Consider examples from your own work and community.
- **What does a decolonial and intersectional approach to investing in girls look like in practice?** Reflect on how you are incorporating this approach into your work. If it feels challenging to articulate, consider whether you are actively engaging with and navigating the tensions of holding yourself, your organisation, and your sector accountable to this approach.
- **Reflect on the statement, "Lasting change arises when the resistance, power, vision, leadership, and aspirations of those enduring harm and injustice take precedence."** In what ways are you holding yourself accountable to fostering this lasting change, and what opportunities exist for you to deepen your commitment?

Why, What, And How Of Girls Resistance & Activism

Girls, Girlhood And The Spark Of Her Resistance¹

Girls resist because to resist is to live, breathe, and be in the world as a girl. In order to understand girls' resistance—the strength, power, and forces behind it—it is important to understand first the context of girls' lives. It is against the backdrop of her mere existence being questioned, and often threatened, that she resists.

Girls face constant injustice, oppression, and violence that deeply affects their minds, bodies, and spirits. Whether through direct experiences of harm or the persistent fear of it, their choices and mobility are restricted—both consciously and subconsciously. Violence is a defining reality in their lives, spanning personal, structural, cultural, institutional, and collective levels. It manifests in physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, often within the home, and is reinforced by systemic forces such as white supremacy, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, misogyny, and gendered poverty. Additionally, girls endure oppression under repressive regimes, occupation, armed conflict, and displacement, further shaping their lived experiences.

The violence girls face ranges from that which has a clear perpetrator and victim, to violence that shows up as unequal structural power, to the everyday violence she witnesses and experiences around her. Cultural narratives about control make it more appealing for families, parents, and communities to close off options for girls and more frightening for them to leave them open; distancing girls from the assets, networks, and services they need to thrive. And ultimately, they affect the choices a girl can envisage for themselves: creating not just ambivalence but fatalism about lives of violence and oppression.

Everywhere that girls are living and surviving violence—in their families, homes, schools, and streets—there are also girls who are finding ways to survive, defy, push back, and organise. This resistance is not merely individual, it is deeply collective, rooted in solidarity, shared experiences, and a commitment to dismantling the systems that perpetuate harm.

Girls transform sites of oppression into spaces of resistance, igniting movements that challenge the very structures designed to silence them. They build networks of care and survival, harnessing their shared resilience to create alternatives. Whether organising for safer streets and schools, leading peer-led initiatives to address gender-based violence, or holding institutions accountable, girls' resistance highlights the collective power they wield to drive systemic change

1. Some of this text is adapted from chapter 2 of the Stories of Girls' Resistance.

"Growing up we had to go every 3 months to the immigration office to stamp my residence permit and maybe like a week before the appointment I didn't sleep because I didn't know what was expected of me. So, this kind of bureaucratic biography has really shaped me. Being a refugee in Europe is very difficult and then on top of that encountering racism and aggression towards black girls from your teachers, from other people on the road."

– Asia, Eritrea, Stories of Girls' Resistance Storyteller

"Those of us who have a disability, we know that it is not easy to go out there; even though we accompany each other out there ... unfortunately there are many of us who experience different forms of violence."

– Elizabeth, Mexico, Our Resistance: Stories of Disability Rights Activists

"We felt restricted. Restricted from doing, restricted from saying, restricted from everything. I even remember an aunt who used to approach us for the way we laughed. Yes, because as a young girl, if you are in the yard and a neighbour hears you, it means you are laughing openly and loudly. You had to be discreet."

– Fati, Niger, Stories of Girls' Resistance

"I saw how journalists were attacked, forced to leave the country, imprisoned, and this was a decisive moment for me. I thought I did not want that in my life and wanted to stop it. Therefore, I refused writing, I thought it would end up bad for me. This kind of hopelessness prevailed."

– Sea, Uzbekistan, Stories of Girls' Resistance

"Some of the realities that have increased my motivation are girls who are raped, circumcised, 9, 10, 11, 12 year old girls who are married. Girls who are beaten at home, girls who have such heartbreaking stories that when you listen, you just want to help them, to give your body and soul so that they find their freedom."

– Kadiatou, Guinea, Stories of Girls' Resistance

In a survey of girl-led organisations conducted for the [Girls to the Front](#) report in 2018, 50 percent of organisations polled globally were created because of a community incident that moved the girls to act against an injustice, while 38 percent were driven to organising by a personal incident.

Some issues are specific to certain regions or cultures. For example, female genital cutting moves a great number of girls in Africa and West Asia, but it is not a priority for girls in Latin America where only a few Indigenous communities engage in the practice. While early marriage is a global issue, it is most common in Africa and Asia. Meanwhile the most common issues that mobilise girls worldwide are gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and access to education.

Girls are constantly questioning their surroundings and devising original ways to fight the patriarchy. From protesting in schools by refusing to go to their classes, to advocating for abortion rights in their communities, to fighting the violence so many of them already have and will experience, girls are organising for autonomy and visibility.

Take the 10 girls who make up Colectivo Sulans—a girl-centred organisation in Carabayllo, a rural district in Lima, Perú. The girls in the group, whose ages range from 7 to 12 years old, gather at school after class to talk about the issues that concern and affect them, like the mistreatment of girls and women; they know that rape and femicide are very real risks to which they're already exposed and which can

even be initiated by friends and family. While it may be difficult to think about young girls talking with each other about the possibilities of being raped by family members or friends, this is the reality in which girl activists in Colectivo Sulans live. Being conscious about it brings them together and helps them strengthen their self-care systems. This year, they marched among thousands of women in Lima for women's and girls' rights. They also have fun together; they paint and celebrate each other's birthdays, too. Ultimately, the members of Colectivo Sultans know it is important for girls to feel visible, and heard, and to march for the girls who cannot.

Excerpt from "A Look at Girl-Led Activism All Over the World" by Nany Guerrerx



"In this film, I share my own story of resisting early marriage and going against my family, even having to run away to the village, to escape early marriage. I introduce my best friend in the film, and together we share a conversation of two girls who have had their life turned upside down due to our decision to resist childhood marriage. We talk about our struggles to finish school and support ourselves, and we show what our lives look like now after resisting childhood marriage."
–Written and produced by Fatmata Kargbo

Girlhood Should Not Have To Be A State Of Resistance

We want to be careful not to romanticise girls' resistance. Girls are resisting because of the systemic oppression they face living in the world as a girl with intersecting identities. Their resistance is leading to better worlds for themselves, and us all, and this should be resourced and their labour should be recognised. However, this is not where our vision for girls and young feminists should end.

We should question why girls must resist and work to address the structural barriers that prevent their safety and freedom. We should follow their lead and work towards building a world where *all* people are safe and free. Ultimately, we should be working towards a world where girls don't have to resist, because they are safe, free to play, to learn, to be free, to be.



I want a future for girls, I want them to be free. I want them to not feel like they have to act a certain way based on stereotypes and I want them to be able to live and honestly live! To mess up, have awkward first dates, have zits, get braces, accidentally say a wrong word in class. I want them to live. – Leilani, Turtle Island (United States of America), [Stories of Girls' Resistance Storyteller](#)



Reflection and Writing Questions

- **Reflect on your earliest moment of resistance.** What circumstances surrounded this moment, and what inspired you to push back, question, or change course?
- **Imagine creating a map tracing your journey from this initial instance of resistance.** Include the year and describe subsequent moments of resistance that led up to and followed this pivotal moment. What thoughts, beliefs, or experiences prompted each instance of resistance?
- **Delve into the details of each moment of resistance on your map.** What specific aspects of the status quo did you challenge, and why? How did you engage with the issue, whether through questioning, dialogue, activism, or other means?
- **Consider the support system surrounding your moments of resistance.** Who were the individuals, groups, or resources that offered encouragement, guidance, or inspiration? How did their support contribute to your ability to resist and navigate through challenges?
- **Think about the young activists you've spoken with, what were some of their different moments of resistance and what sparked their resistance?** Are there examples you can think of when someone's individual experience turned into collective activism with others in their communities?
- **If you haven't had much experience with young activists, we encourage you to explore the [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#) collection** and use some of these tools to map out the journeys of activists you read. Then reflect on what you learned from this process.

For Further Learning

- ["Chapter 1 Girlhood: A Story of Resistance,"](#) *Stories of Girls' Resistance*, 2024.
- ["Chapter 2: Why Girls' Resist,"](#) *Stories of Girls' Resistance*, 2024.
- ["For Girls' Sake, Let's End the Myth of the Fearless Girl,"](#) Our Collective Practice, April 8, 2024.
- Tara Wu, ["How Girls Have Brought Political Change to America,"](#) *Smithsonian*, October 20, 2020. It's worth noting that while this article highlights the role of girls in driving political change, the [exhibit itself](#) depoliticised their involvement, relegating them to a silo rather than recognising their essential role in social movements.
- [Girls Challenging the Gender Rules– Synthesis Report,](#) Plan International, 2019.

Girls' Resistance and Dreaming as Tools for Worldbuilding

Through the power of **dreaming**, girls are imagining new realities, and using collective dreaming as a political and strategic tool. Through these dreams, they articulate demands, propositions, and bold visions for a world that centres dignity, equity, and justice.


“*Girls' resistance is about their defiance not only as a reaction to violence but an assertion of their radical imagination and inherent right to exist freely. Girls' resistance is not just about surviving, it is also about claiming space to dream, to envision futures beyond the violence and oppression they are subjected to. This spark of resistance is a form of revolutionary imagination, a refusal to accept the limitations imposed on their bodies, lives, and aspirations. It is not simply a push against the forces that seek to contain them, but an active creation of alternative realities, where they are fully in control of their own destinies. Where they dream.*” – Priyanka Samy, Dalit Feminist Activist

Through their resistance, girls and young feminists disrupt, defy, and actively challenge the injustices that seek to suppress them. They stand in solidarity with each other and their communities, fighting for justice. Through their dreams, they reclaim and rebuild, shaping visions of a world that centres their power and agency. **They are teaching us that dreaming is not simply a hope for a better future but a radical political intervention—an act of assertion that declares their right to shape the world. Together, through both resistance and dreaming, girls and young feminists are worldbuilding, using these tools to create life-affirming worlds for themselves and us all.**

It is said that one morning in 1860, underground railroad conductor Harriet Tubman came to the breakfast table singing the words, “My people are free! My people are free.” Reportedly, she was unable to eat due to the excitement her body held that morning. It wasn't until 1863, three full years later, that the emancipation of African-Americans took place—but that night, Harriet had such a vivid dream of freedom that she celebrated as though it had already been achieved.

Tubman was known for her predictive visions, which started after an injury she endured at 13 years old. She began to fall unexpectedly into sleep-like states and reemerge with stories of her vivid dreams. These dreams would often support her navigation of dozens of enslaved people to freedom.

Excerpt from “Dreaming Awake” by Rachel Cargle



The ways [girls define resistance](#) is as diverse as they are. Resistance refers to the formal and informal, bounded and unbounded, spontaneous and organised, individual and collective ways in which girls are resisting the many abuses of power they experience in different ways. Resistance takes many shapes and forms. First acts of resistance lead to second and third acts building over time, to the moments where girls are sparking, leading, and sustaining movements. Resistance is defined and redefined over lifetimes. And passed down generations.

"For me, any step, whether it's in a word, me saying no, choosing to tweet, walking the streets, any steps taken to deny the oppressor, that's resistance."

- Edna, Uganda, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)

"When I started moving outside and reading materials, I got to understand that everything that frustrates me - the plight of women and girls in village - is nothing but a system in our society which is under the patriarchy and they do not want women to come out of their homes, get independence and achieve empowerment."

- Shahzadi, Pakistan, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)

"Resistance is something we do in our everyday lives... when we simply speak to our family members, teach our own relatives, brothers and sisters that we are, in fact, primarily people, personalities, individuals, and only then women, men, mothers, and so on. When we educate children - this is also resistance."

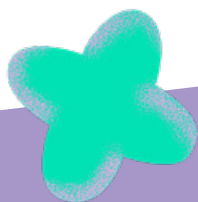
- Salt, Kyrgyzstan, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)

"I don't know if I have a really bad memory, but I think my resistance was so subtle that I don't recollect. Because, if you've noticed, it's a bit hazy when it comes to girlhood because I've always been this way. It sounds crazy but I don't even remember a moment, because in subtle ways, I was always resisting."

- Ulemu, Malawi, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)

"I have had it even since childhood, when they hold me, 'you are a girl, you should be like that.' Already back then I had this [question of] why? Already back then I wondered and did not understand it, and I was angry, only because I am a girl, I am not allowed to do something?!"

- Salt, Kyrgyzstan, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)



Link to Video



I had heard about this word <<gender>>

“

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

Anna spent her last 14 years—half of her life—fighting and protesting for the things she believes in. Her journey in the world of activism began when she was 14 and discovered the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. It still continues, she works with a coalition focused on stopping violence against women, teaches a module about gender representations in the media at a university, and founded the first feminist library in Armenia.

Anchored in care, determination, and creativity, girls and young feminists use dreaming as a tool to strategise and push forward demands, propositions, and calls to action about what the world and our communities could be. It serves as an imaginarium of possibilities where our collective dignity is centred. We recognise that girls are not merely resisting the status quo; they are also dreaming and re-imagining a world where none of these harmful structures exist, and are actively working to create this world. A world where they can live, where they are safe, and where their families and communities are no longer seen as threats.

What would the world look like if it supported the dreams of girls and young feminists



*Choice
to be
to heal
to gather*

*Choice and space
Space like a paradise
Space for play
Space to work
Space to connect*

*Space so abundant
so joyful
and diverse
the universe itself
with all creatures
the plants
the animals
the beings*



*What would the world look like if it supported
the dreams of girls and young feminists?*

Like us

– Excerpt from the forthcoming publication on *Girls Dreaming and Worldbuilding*

*I included the word paradise, because the world we are building is one
where there is choice for everyone.*

– Dani, Romania, *Dreaming and Worldbuilding*

*There are thriving movements, community, spaces, and abundance.
The world is joyful. No matter who you are there is space for you.*

– Liesel, South Africa, *Dreaming and Worldbuilding*



“Dreaming is a critical tool—that along with resistance—has long been used in worldbuilding by social justice movements working to advance our collective agenda towards liberation, one that girls and young feminists wield with extraordinary power. Anchored in care, determination, and creativity, girls and young feminists use dreaming as a tool to strategise and push forward demands, propositions, and calls to action about what the world and our communities could be. It serves as an imaginarium of possibilities where our collective dignity is centred.” – Priyanka Samy, Dalit Feminist Activist

“I have a dream that one day we will all have access to opportunities regardless of disability, regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, regardless of anything. Inequalities are the source of every struggle. So this is not only for our own interest. This is also for your own interest. I feel that we must support each other in our struggles, because if I had stayed in the situation of being ignored and not having access to education, if I remained in that, no one would really know my name. So every night, before I sleep, I think about my day and ask: how did I really contribute to the change? And, until we reach the society that I dream, I will keep raising my voice. I will keep dreaming. This is resistance.” – Anisie Byukusenge, Rwanda, *Our Collective Resistance*

For Further Learning

- [Our Resistance: Stories of Disability Rights Activists – Anthology 1](#)
- Rokheya Sakhawat Hossain and Durga Bai, [Sultana's Dreams](#), 1905.
- Ruha Benjamin, [Imagination: A Manifesto](#), 2024.
- Rachel Cargle, “[Dreaming Awake](#),” *Atmos*, May 30, 2022.
- Jessalynn Keller, “[Making Activism Accessible: Exploring Girls' Blogs As Sites](#)”
- [Of Contemporary Feminist Activism](#),” in *Girlhood and the Politics of Place*, 2016.



Reflection and Writing Questions

- **Compile a bullet list describing resistance, drawing from your personal experiences and reflections on what you have read so far.** Then, craft your own definition of resistance based on this list.
- **Read the poem “What would the world look like if it supported the dreams of girls and young feminists?” aloud.** Pay attention to your thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions. Write down your unfiltered responses, and afterward, reflect on why these particular reactions emerged. Consider inviting peers or friends to join you in this exercise for additional insights and perspectives.

Building Girls' Power



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

Power is not complex—it is everywhere, inherent in all of us. The framing of power as intricate or inaccessible is a deliberate construct of systemic injustices, designed to obscure its presence and perpetuate inequality. This framing transforms power into an abstract concept rather than a tangible and ever-present practice, distancing communities—particularly those marginalised by systems of oppression—from recognising, accessing, and wielding it. By making power seem elusive, systemic injustices maintain control, ensuring that power remains centralised within dominant (i.e., narratives, practices, and policies).

Audre Lorde's work provides profound insights into the nature of power, its omnipresence, and its dual role as both a tool of oppression and a source of liberation. Her analysis was deeply shaped by her girlhood experiences as a Black lesbian girl with disabilities, where survival demanded reimagining and reclaiming power on her own terms, rather than operating within the confines of oppressive systems. [Alexis Pauline Gumbs](#) captures this dynamic powerfully, describing Lorde as, *"The young girl who repeated this poem [a poem about listening] until she knew it by heart had to turn a world full of absence where she did not see herself reflected into an audience for what she needed to say. She had to turn institutions and movement spaces designed to ignore her into vessels for profound listening."*

For girls, power is deliberately structured and made complex, so they face immense obstacles to accessing it, compounded by layers of systemic oppression. They are born powerful. Yet, the systems and structures around them work relentlessly to dismantle that power, stripping them of opportunities to exercise their full agency. Girls contend with oppressive power dynamics at every turn—at home, in schools, and within their communities. Power is wielded against them in overt and insidious ways, reinforcing their exclusion and limiting their potential.

Dominant power structures centre whiteness, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and capitalism to exploit and oppress marginalised communities. In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, power is critically examined not as a fixed or abstract concept but as a dynamic, relational force that must be actively reclaimed and redefined. The anthology emphasises that power cannot be ignored or passively discussed; it demands intentional action and transformation. As the authors profoundly assert, “We have the power to actually transform our experience, change our lives, save our lives.” This call to action urges us to move away from the “savior complex” and toward frameworks rooted in justice.

All too often empowerment programs and interventions focused on girls are based on the mistaken idea that power is something that can simply be given to them rather than addressing the deeper, systemic issues that take power away from girls in the first place. This perspective results in funding strategies and interventions that emphasise building internal capacities—such as skills training, livelihood programs, or scholarships to attend school—without addressing the broader socio-political context in which girls live. While these initiatives may foster personal transformation, they are generally apolitical and often fail to consider the systemic barriers that do nothing to demolish or eliminate the systems of oppression they exist within. Worse, they perpetuate the reductive framing of girls as either “individuals in need” or “assets to uplift others in their community,” reducing them to tools for development goals rather than recognising them as a population facing systemic

oppression requiring systemic solutions. Many funders and development organisations further undermine girls by prioritising their own agendas, commodifying their stories for fundraising, and presenting oversimplified narratives that appeal to donors while ignoring the realities of systemic inequality.

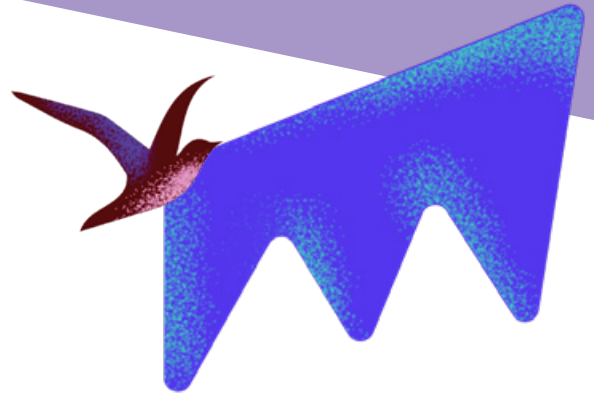
We cannot genuinely or sustainably build power if we advocate for individual and isolated solutions that replicate and uphold the status quo for girls. Instead, we must centre their inherent power and work toward dismantling and transforming the systems—comprising strategies, narratives, policies, and more—that actively harm girls. True liberation lies not in treating girls as instruments of development but in recognising their agency, addressing the root causes of systemic inequality, and co-creating pathways for girls to reclaim and wield the power that has always been theirs.

“

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



To build girls' power and support their resistance in ways that subverts the status quo requires intentional political education and consciousness-raising. When girls are supported to question the nature of their exploitation, there is a critical foundation for radical change that can transform their lives. By connecting individual life-stories with lessons from history, sociology and politics, we can begin to learn how everyday people, through everyday acts of resistance, have remade the world for the better.



“ *When girls come together to share their stories, strategies, and dreams, they are able to build a collective force that is far more powerful than any one girl can achieve on her own. This collective power not only amplifies their voices but also builds a movement rooted in mutual support, shared vision, and a deeper understanding of interconnected struggles. For radical transformation to take root, we must invest in organising girls—for them to see their struggles not as isolated events but as part of a larger, systemic fight. When we shift the focus from individual empowerment to collective liberation, we not only subvert the status quo but challenge the very foundation of the systems that work to keep girls marginalised and isolated.”* – Priyanka Samy, Dalit Feminist Activist

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 larger 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. This framing, or in other words, 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.

“ *Power is both a source of oppression in its abuse and a source of emancipation in its use. In this way, power can be understood not only as the domination of some over others but also as a capacity to 'be, do, dream, and transform.' It is something that occurs not only in high-level decision-making spheres but it is also key to the way we build daily life and the pillars of autonomy and emancipation.”* – Juliana Román Lozano, Colombia, Feminist Activist

As activists, we are concerned about the injustice, inequality, marginalisation, exclusion, discrimination, stigma, and violence that we see around us. But do we always recognise that power is at the heart of each of these, and at the heart of every social problem? Do we realise that injustice and inequality of every kind is actually an expression of power or a symptom of power structures? The fact is that power lies at the heart of human relationships and of how societies are organised. So when activists try to change people's lives, or tackle the injustices they face, we are actually trying to change power equations.

Most of us recognise and understand power to some extent. But often, we recognise power in its most visible or direct form, but not in other, or more complex forms that it takes. For example, we see that women's lack of economic resources is a cause of their lack of voice in their families, or that social attitudes cause son preference and discrimination against girls. So we launch income generation or micro-credit programs for women, or awareness campaigns on the rights of girls. Then we find that while these have helped to some extent, the basic social attitudes are still in place. Women are earning more but their husbands are controlling their income.

This is because our strategies addressed the symptoms, not the root causes, of these problems. If we want to change power equations effectively, we have to have a much deeper and clearer understanding of power. This must begin with a greater awareness of the different locations in which power operates, its different faces or forms, and how power structures are constructed and survive. Understanding power in all its dimensions is especially important for women's rights and gender equality activists because the invisible and ideological dimensions of power are as important as access to resources in maintaining gender discrimination.

Excerpt from *All About Power: Understanding Social Power Structures* by Srilatha Batliwala

For Further Learning

- *Girls and Young Feminists Sparking, Leading, and Organising Across Social Movements*, Girls' Power Learning Institute, 2025.
 - Kate Cronin-Furman, Nimmi Gowrinathan, and Rafia Zakaria, "[Emissaries of Empowerment](#)," Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership, September 2017.
- [This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color](#), 1981.
- Paulo Freire, [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#), 1970.
- Srilatha Batliwala, [All About Power: Understanding Social Power Structures](#), CREA, 2019.



Reflection and Writing Questions

- **How does the shift from individual empowerment to collective liberation challenge dominant paradigms of development?** What examples from history or current movements illustrate the effectiveness of collective power?
- **In what ways do invisible and ideological dimensions of power reinforce systems of oppression?** How can understanding these dimensions help address root issues?



From Individual Moments Toward Collective Consciousness

Sparking And Sustaining Social Movements

“

Women were living in a lot of oppression so when they realised the power within themselves they wanted to act on it to make sure that they are free. They also saw the need to use the power with their friends so they act in a collective and use the power to make sure that things are really transforming for everyone.”

– Sibongile Chibwe Singile, Just Associates Malawi

Girls' existence and experience present clear moments of questioning and challenging systems that seek to oppress and erase them. Their resistance emerges as both a conscious and subconscious defiance and challenge of what has been deemed as the norm and to question the economic, political, social, and cultural structures around her. Along this journey, many girls come to a profound realisation: **their stories and struggles are similar to that of other girls.** Their individual experiences are important but not unique to them; and are part of a collective experience that many girls face. And for many girls, this is a moment when they realise their situation is not by happenstance, but rather deeply intentional, and baked into the systems and structures surrounding them. It is with this awareness that girls start to more deeply understand the solutions to what they are facing are not individual solutions, but rather systems change solutions that upend the status quo for everyone. This is a critical step in building power and is especially important for girls who are blamed for the violence and discrimination they face, in helping them move from self-blame to a realisation that there are larger systems at play that are responsible for this harm.

“Women were living in a lot of oppression so when they realised the power within themselves they wanted to act on it to make sure that they are free. They also saw the need to use the power with their friends so they act in a collective and use the power to make sure that things are really transforming for everyone.” –Sibongile Chibwe Singile, Malawi, Just Associates

Excerpt from an interview with Karlygach Madynova, a FRIDA: The Young Feminist Fund Regional Advisor

What important moments or events have contributed to your growth as a young feminist?

I remember the moment I discovered the definition of the word feminism. A word coming from a foreign language, often used in a negative context – “Oh those feminists!”, and being a representation of “the West,” resonated with me so much. No one ever explained it to me and without being introduced to the movement I somehow already knew what it was about and how I wanted to become a feminist. A bit later, when I was 15 years old I randomly became a volunteer in a march organised by the Bishkek Feminists Initiative (BFI) on 8 March 2019. It was a turning point in my feminist journey. The number of emotions that I experienced that day—solidarity, a big sense of community, empathy, pride, and happiness. Before that, I was just a girl who would read about feminism, but at this specific moment seeing so many women and girls

holding their creative banners and shouting out bold statements in unison, I was tearing up from all of this solidarity. It was a day, after which I would proudly say that I am a feminist and the day when I decided to commit to my feminist activism.

What inspires and navigates your efforts as a girl activist to combat oppressive systems and achieve gender equality?

Remembering that I am not alone, embracing sisterhood, being supportive and getting support, and building a community of folks around me who share the same vision and goals.



This awareness, whether sudden or gradual, propels girls to seek out one another, forging supportive communities where they can share, teach, learn, provide resources, organise, and imagine a new world. One where she knows she is not alone, as she has never been. One where she is not isolated, but rather celebrated and respected while enjoying and learning from a community around her. Thus, a shattering of the myth of **individualism** occurs as she is able to recognise that her struggles are connected to other struggles. And a grounding in the power, creativity, and inherent interconnectedness of humanity and all beings.

Girls' creativity and collectivism are therefore key principles and strategies in how they organise. For many girls, once they start to understand their individual experience to be part of a collective experience, they actively seek out others to connect, share experiences, and mobilise and organise towards creating change and envisioning a new reality. Whether in secret gatherings, in schools, in sports, on the streets, on the way to the well, in savings clubs, on factory floors and in friendship groupings. This (building-collective power) is happening across neighbourhoods, communities, movements, nationally, and beyond borders—physically and virtually. This solidarity expands girls' realms and realities in a world that seeks to shrink their spaces and possibilities. It builds social capital and negotiating power for girls, which evidence demonstrates leads to decreased violence for girls and brings more meaning and joy to girls' lives.



“ *I need to find people to work with, I need to find groups. I started to look around and I found actually – I found a lot of groups, I met a lot of people who all of them right now are my best friends. We started to organise demonstrations in the street and other peaceful activities like distribute flowers with a small letter – what the demonstrations are for, what is our demand, what is our request, why we are doing this? We aren't people who want to destroy the country, we're people who want to build this country.”*

– Ahed, Syria, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)

“ *When you have to sit down in terms of the planning and the organisation and the creation of something, you realise just how necessary all these parts are. The team, everybody and how you can't do anything alone. And if I really want to make, have any form of resistance and activism, it has to be through working with others at all times.”*

– Jahnelle, Antigua and Barbuda, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)

“ *Solidarity would be putting personal interests aside and working together towards a common goal...I think there is power in solidarity. When women come together, we are unstoppable.”*

– Musu, The Gambia, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)

Through the development of an awareness of collective struggles and power, girls move toward collective consciousness: solidarity. That is a political understanding, and actions grounded in the recognition of our inherent interdependence and connection within our struggles and collective liberation. This means that issues or injustices are not seen as separate from one's reality, but intertwined and thus requiring a collective, intersectional, and long-term commitment to address them. When we centre in solidarity, we dispel the myth that the solution to violence can be found in the individual work or in the individual mind of the singular survivor. [It is through work that builds connections, sisterhood, and solidarity between groups of girls, who may find ways to keep each other safe, to push back and model alternative ways of being with each other in the world.](#)

“ *When girls come together, they are not just forging political movements, they are nurturing spaces of healing and community that are essential for sustaining resistance and building futures rooted in justice. This radical care is inherently political. It defies the societal norms that frame care as passive or unimportant, reclaiming it as a revolutionary act. When girls choose to care for each other, to uplift one another's voices and experiences, they are dismantling power structures. Their solidarity is a form of resistance against the commodification of relationships and the exploitation of their labor and bodies. It is a refusal to accept the individualistic, competitive systems that are designed to keep them powerless. By centring care in their organising, girls are building new worlds where everyone is nurtured, supported, and celebrated in community. This kind of solidarity is revolutionary because it recognises that true power lies not in domination, but in collective care, love, and interdependence.”*

– Priyanka Samy, Dalit Feminist Activist

Resisting against the status quo that perpetuates systemic injustices to change it



Link to Video



“ I have yearned for the land. Wherever there is land, I have fought for it. So I am joined to the land, to the mud. I consider mud priceless. Sometimes even more so than the resources that are below it and I see it dug up and thrown aside. I see mines and power plants and all the destruction that's happening around us.”
– Savita, India, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)

As a young girl, Savita had to shoulder the responsibilities of supporting her family when her father lost his job. These experiences fueled her refusal to accept the norms imposed by her community and the systems that exploited both women and the land. She has been involved in education efforts, campaigns, and community-building efforts. Her resistance led her to a journey of activism where she spearheaded the movement “Us and the Land. Us and Coal.” The protests evolved, from songs to strikes to cases heard and won in the National Green Tribunal.



Link to Video



“ I was all for women empowerment. My only aim was to make women strong. I believed that if we go out and face the world we will be strong. If we hide inside our houses we will never realise our own capacity to do things. So I felt that this is the first step on the path to empowerment of girls.”
– Tanzina, Bangladesh, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)

Tanzina comes from a low-income community in Bangladesh, where as a young girl, she endured relentless scrutiny. She confronted numerous injustices and adversities, observing that many other girls faced similar challenges. Motivated by her empathy and understanding of their struggles, Tanzina resolved to create opportunities for girls in her community to feel empowered and secure. Supported by groups and communities, she became the first woman to become an instructor of “self-defense training” at the age of nineteen. Drawing from her experiences, she has since trained hundreds of girls, developing tailored programs to instill empowerment and equip them with self-defence skills.

Solidarity and forming our collective resistance - seeking freedom, seeking liberation



“Solidarity cancels geographical borders, it strengthens humanity and makes women feel that they are not alone. The time period that my generation grew up in, there was a revolutionary spirit and so many examples of women and movements around us that encouraged us to push and demand freedom. So much was happening around the world that it felt like we were all working in solidarity with each other. My campus engagements involved advocating for women's rights and building a revolutionary movement spanning various social and economic levels. I collaborated with women of all ages, engaging in numerous activities that significantly influenced the first intifada, with thousands of women participating.

Solidarity is a crucial value in achieving justice, as it entails standing for the victory of the victim. Those who demonstrate solidarity do not merely offer sympathy to the oppressed side; rather, they embody conviction, uphold values, and recognise their responsibility towards justice. Practising solidarity not only deepens my own humanity but also supports the humanity of others. Solidarity eliminates geographical boundaries; it encapsulates the essence of humanity. When I stand in solidarity with women in Venezuela or Yemen, I affirm our shared humanity, and women feel they are not alone. This solidarity provides us with a source of strength.” – Aisha, Occupied Palestine, Palestinian Girls' Resistance



“At first, my resistance was spontaneous and in many ways imposed on me. It's not that I started doing things because I wanted to but because I found myself in front of a tank and because I found myself with three siblings and social norms that don't support women and girls. I have been fighting since I was 15 to earn a living and go to university, to help my sister do her homework and then wake up at 5 in the morning to make sandwiches for the kids to go to school. I was a mother, I was a father, and I was everything in between. This transformed me. My resistance continued to grow with me, it became my characteristics as an individual and I started to define myself by the form of resistance that I could carry with me. Then it became part of who I am—an indispensable part and it's something that I cannot compromise now.

My resistance sustained because I started reading about politics and liberation both in Palestine and across the globe, connecting with people, joining different groups, and this led me to believe that I cannot be doing this on my own.”

– Sandie, Occupied Palestine, Palestinian Girls' Resistance

Indigenous girls and young women rise - connecting individual violence with systemic injustice

Link to Video



“

In April, there were only five of us. I always remember that in the beginning of this whole movement, the way it used to be. So intimate and so personal. In the beginning, nobody really wanted to stand up, nobody really wanted to camp, and so the youth took it upon ourselves to camp.”

- [Jasilyn Charger](#), Turtle Island (United States of America)

Jasilyn Charger is from the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. She is one of the first people to set up camp at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in April 2016, co-founding the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. Growing up she experienced and saw the violence that her community experienced. As she was able to connect with her community, she realised that this was part of the legacies of generational abuse caused by colonisation. With her family and community, she began to become more involved to address the injustices harming her community seeking to dismantle these systems. She got involved in organising, leadership, and political education spaces at her community centre. When the Keystone XL oil company was planning to run an oil pipeline through sacred lands and waters at Standing Rock Sioux reservation, she organised with a local group who she had been working with to stand up and defend their community and land.



“*What happens to our land, happens to our women. I look at our community and even a lot of the movements like the #NoDAPL movement, where extractive industries are in a sense and symbolically raping our mother earth. And our mother earth being a feminine entity because it gives life. I am someone who is supposed to be here to protect the earth, what's sacred, protect our resources that our mother earth gives to us. We're still here. We're still surviving. We're resisting*”
- Hope Alvaro, Turtle Island (United States of America)

Hope Alvarado faced domestic violence and had to flee her home to seek safety. While facing homelessness, poverty, and the trauma of domestic violence, she was able to connect with a community that supported her in this critical moment and helped her in her journey to identify the ways in which her childhood experience was connected to systems of injustices at large. Since then, she has been working with a community of Native women, contributing to larger social movements working to systemic injustices perpetuating the violence and exploitation faced by Native girls, women, and their ancestral lands. Her efforts encompass organising protests and grassroots actions, advocating at both local and national levels, collaborating with local organisations to ensure essential resources such as housing are accessible to Native communities, and spearheading political education initiatives.

WoteSawa

Self-led organising is critical in shaping and supporting the emergence of girls' resistance, and girl-led spaces provide brave and safe spaces for girls' autonomy to emerge. WoteSawa in Tanzania is a clear example of this.

In Tanzania, an estimated 1 million children, predominantly girls, are engaged in domestic work. Poverty and other related challenges in rural areas drive children to migrate to urban centres in search of employment in private households. Despite their crucial role, some domestic workers face mistreatment and rights violations. WoteSawa was established as an advocate for and by domestic workers, uniquely positioning it to address issues within the sector.

The term "WoteSawa" translates to "all equal" in Swahili. WoteSawa advocates for the rights of domestic workers and combats human trafficking, with a specific focus on child trafficking. Their comprehensive programming includes educating workers about their rights, facilitating employment contracts, providing economic empowerment opportunities, and actively advocating for legal reforms.

Founded by two former child domestic workers, WoteSawa takes a bold stance in advocating for basic rights. Each year, they provide refuge for approximately 75 children who have escaped trafficking. Since its establishment in 2014, WoteSawa has assisted hundreds of survivors, connecting their individual experiences to broader systemic injustices and working to build their collective power to fight for systems and structures that work for all children.

Angela David's reflection on social change

"History is made by ordinary people. When ordinary people join together to create movements, they make change happen. We join social movements in order to transform our relatively powerless individual selves into a great collective self. That is a lesson that should be learned by those who hold political power in this country today, because often they assume that in order to satisfy one group, another group has to be attacked or scapegoated. Diversity and inclusion without justice, without transformation, can leave the racist, misogynist structures intact. To work against racism also entails working against heteropatriarchy, working against ableism, homophobia and a range of other social injustices. We're not so much voting for the person who will lead us to the mountaintop, but the person who will give us more space to engage in the efforts and movements that are really responsible for historical change. I try not to think in terms of years or what is happening now but in terms of much longer periods of time — what will be the meaning of this present moment 100 years from now, or 500 years from now. There were people 200 years ago who were struggling in order for us to be able to do something like what we're doing today."

Excerpt from "'History Is Made by Ordinary People': Activist Angela Davis Headlines Change the Status Quo Conference"

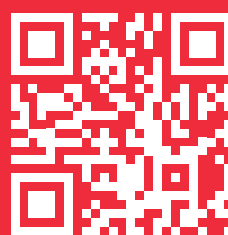


Writing and Reflection Questions

For Further Learning

- ["Chapter 3: From Violence to a Place of Power: Situating Journeys of Resistance in girls' Worlds,"](#) *Stories of Girls' Resistance*, 2023.
- ["Palestinian Girls' Resistance: Towards Our Liberation,"](#) 2024.
- ["Feminist Political Organising Offers Lessons in Narrative Power,"](#) Our Collective Practice, April 10, 2024.
- ["Storytelling Can Move Mountains,"](#) Our Collective Practice, April 3, 2024.
- ["Video: One Year at Standing Rock,"](#) Reveal, April 10, 2017.

- **Explore the connections between their activism and your own journey.** In what ways do their experiences resonate with or diverge from your own? How have their actions and insights influenced your perspective and approach to activism?
- **Go back to your map of your act(s)/moment(s) of resistance.** Are there any collective efforts, like the ones shared by the activists in this section, that come to mind and connect to add to these act(s)/moment(s) of resistance on your map?
- **Can you identify any large systemic injustices that led to your moments of resistance,** similar to the ways in which the activists connected their own individual experiences to larger injustices that impacted their communities?
- **In thinking about the change you are working to create in the world, what systems must be dismantled in order for this change to happen and be sustained?** Who else is working on dismantling these systems?
- **Was there a moment when your individual resistance became collective?** If not, could it have become collective if circumstances were different?
- **Go back to your definitions of girl, girlhood, and resistance.** Reflect on what you wrote and consider if they need revisions or adjustments. If revisions are necessary, what prompted these changes? If not, why should they remain unchanged?



Link to Video

Girls Activism, Organising, And Across Movements

"No matter what we are doing, the louder we get the more they belittle us, silence our voices."

"You're just a womanist that complains, making a lot of noise for nothing ... but if you are complaining about the noise we are making it means we are doing our job, and we will carry on. We will keep annoying you until the job gets done."

"I'm a girl, I know what I'm fighting for and fighting against."

"It hurts me when people place such little value on what we do, and it points to the bigger picture of how the world sees and values women and girls ... and so even grant makers who are working on things that they think are more important, women and girls have a stake in all of that. Grantmakers cannot be doing a good job if they're leaving girls and women out."

"It's not that you are saving us, it's that we are forgiving you."

"The bullet that does not kill you gives you more strength."

"I don't want anyone to go home and forget about us, I want this day where you heard our stories to last forever. I want peace, I want our voices to be finally heard."

"We as girls are powerful, and we are deserving."

"We don't have time to be afraid anymore, we need to stand and speak no matter if we are shy or scared. I give my story to all of you, and I plead with you to share it wherever you go."

To watch the full panel visit: "Girls Breaking Borders: A Conversation with Girl Activists from Across the World," NoVo Foundation, October 2018.



What Girls and Young Feminists Uniquely Contend With In Their Organising²

In 2018, Mama Cash and FRIDA: The Young Feminist Fund decided to commission a study, [Girls to the Front](#), to find out more about how girls are organising across the world. Using a participatory, feminist, and intersectional research approach, they connected with girl-led organisations across the globe to better understand how girls are organising, lifting up some of the particularities girl-led organisers and organisations face. This built on research conducted in 2014 on the state of young feminist organising, [Brave, Creative, Resilient](#).

1. Girls struggle to be taken seriously by their movement elders

Girls are organising and contributing to social change in every corner of the world. They are doing this with creativity, bravery, determination, and a deep belief that change is possible. And yet, their role, capacity, and effectiveness are constantly doubted, questioned, or outright invisibilized. Adulthood—a bias towards adults, and consequently discrimination against young people—is deeply ingrained in society and, unfortunately, also extends into civil society organisations and movements. Girls face a double burden of prejudice: for being young and for being female. Not surprisingly, girls are not taken seriously in their work and activism by adults, and perhaps more painful is how often they are not taken seriously by older feminists.

This bias is compounded by an impossible expectation of perfection—rooted in white supremacy—that leaves little to no room for girls to make mistakes, experiment, or simply be human. While older activists are afforded the space to learn through trial and error, girls are often expected to prove their worth immediately—to have the perfect analysis, the perfect strategy, the perfect execution. Any misstep is seen as evidence of inexperience rather than a necessary part of the learning process.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, the content from this section pulls heavily from the *Girls' to the Front* and *Brave, Creative, Resilient* reports.

“There is a stereotype, not only because we were girls but because we were young. So I was confronted by many incidents and many situations where my skills and abilities were questioned because I was young. Before seeing anything – before seeing my work. After a while they realised that, yes, she has something, yeah. And they used to underestimate our abilities and our capacity to initiate change. When I had my first job as a programme manager at the age of 21, I used to [be poorly treated when] meeting with managers – even female managers who I thought would be supportive and proud. I was confronted with many older women who were making fun of me. They perceived me as a kid, still a kid.”
– Mariam, Occupied Palestine, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)

“I guess the hardest thing when I was starting out was being taken seriously, and I guess this kind of goes back to the gatekeeper attitude. It was just the idea that you needed to be involved in advocacy for this amount of years to be taken seriously or you need to have done this or that in order to have an opinion on something. I found that to be very problematic for me because I felt like a lot of ideas or a lot of ways of moving forward were being suppressed.” – Akola, Guyana, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)

Adultism, and other forms of discrimination such as homophobia, racism, and xenophobia, show up in movements and sectors in the same ways they show up in the broader world in ways that deeply impact girls and young feminists. This causes harm to girls who are participating in movements and often prevents girls from being recognised and/or leaves them completely invisible.

Despite the discrimination they face, girls are pushing back and showing up in their activism everyday—constantly demonstrating their power and effectiveness—and that they are the present of social movements, not just the future. We must ask ourselves why, if the issues that affect girls are no less serious than those affecting adults, why should their voices carry less weight or their work be any less visible?

“As movements, we lose a significant opportunity when we undermine girls. By not listening to what is important, we, as feminists, are also missing political opportunities to discuss issues such as the right to play, to engage in sports, and acts of resistance like occupying public courts, parks, and streets to play—dimensions that are also essential for challenging power.” –Juliana Román Lozano, Colombia, Feminist Activist

2. Girls and Young Feminists Are Challenging Current Organisation Structures

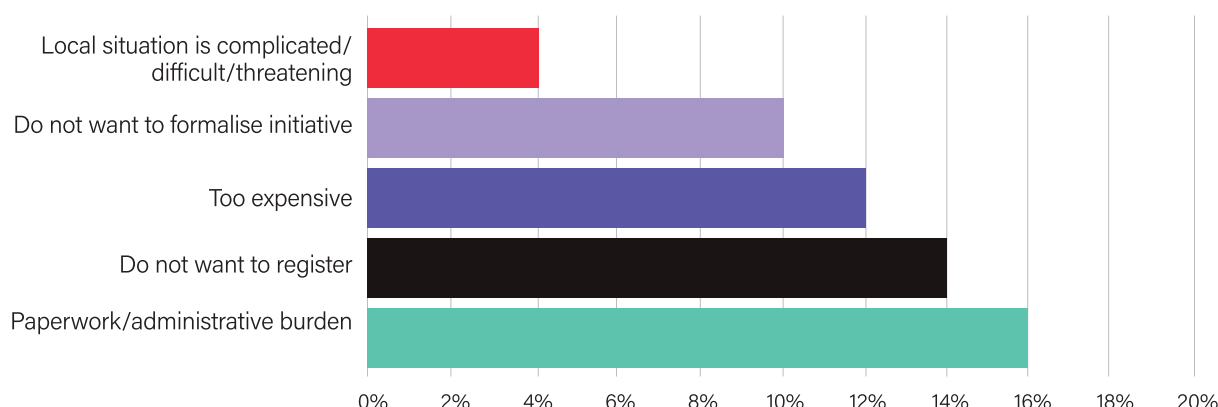
“It would have been powerful, it would have been a lot less work if all of the feminist organisations that have been doing this work for a long time had been on our side. Most of them we have run into have either ignored us or just stayed away from us because what we're doing doesn't align with how they do things. That brings me back to, how do we disrupt traditional structure when we want to create effective collective change?” – Judicaelle, Burundi, [Stories of Girls' Resistance](#)

A crucial difference girls have identified in girl-led organisations versus adult-led ones has to do with structure and decision-making. Girl-led initiatives are usually horizontal in structure with extremely democratic organisational models in which all members are equally valued and consulted. For some, such a model is a conscious rejection of how they perceive traditional adult-centred organisations which are top-down and hierarchical.

While girl-led groups and initiatives certainly have goals and objectives that focus on some form of social transformation in their community, for many, the personal growth aspect of the process is just as important. Some groups provide a support system that offers girls a safe space where they can be themselves, explore their identities and their place in the world, free of traditional patriarchal impositions. Sometimes this is just as important a focus as social change. For such groups, a hierarchical structure does not fit their purposes.



Figure 1. Reasons why unregistered girl-led groups and organisations chose not to register



3. To Register or Not to Register?: A Practical and Political Decision

Organisational registration is most often a primary requirement for securing funding—and girls’ decision to register, or not, is a practical and political one—and for many it is connected to their safety. Although the process of registration varies from country to country, it invariably carries legal and financial implications. In many countries, registration is not available for legal minors so groups are forced to wait until at least one of the members turns 18 before they can begin registration.

“The demand for legal formalisation is not neutral; it is a gatekeeping tool entrenched in patriarchal, colonial, casteist, and capitalist structures that dictate the terms under which resistance and organising are deemed legitimate. For girls, particularly those from marginalised communities, these requirements not only impose practical barriers but also deliver a stark message: activism and organising are considered valid only when recognised by the state—by power structures that have historically worked to oppress them.” –Priyanka Samy, Dalit Feminist Activist

Also, registration processes are often complicated, expensive, and require organisations to establish legal representation, to have financial systems in place and to have hired full-time staff. With no money for staff and no permanent physical address of their own, many girls find themselves ineligible for registration. More and more, social and political movements around the world have encountered huge obstacles and risks, including seeing their work criminalised, due to a general surge of unfriendly policies such as restrictions on funding,

freedom of association, freedom of expression, and freedom of movement. Some girls are apprehensive about taking on the legal and financial responsibilities associated with formalising a group because of the possible consequences. Not registering creates a barrier for many girl-led groups because most funders still require that the organisations they support be legally registered. This makes the role of feminist funds who do support unregistered groups critical lifelines to girl- and young feminist-led work.

The graph below is from a survey in 2018 conducted for the *Girls’ to the Front* report. While the data is 6 years old, it accurately reflects what we hear from girl- and young feminist-led organisations across the world today.

Young feminist-led organisations (led by young women and trans* youth aged under 35 years old) reflect a similar trend. [A study in 2014](#) found that 63 percent of organisations in the study were registered, with the remaining unregistered by choice or necessity. A majority of groups in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia-Pacific were legally registered (84 percent and 71 percent respectively), with the highest numbers of unregistered groups coming from Latin America and the Caribbean (51 percent) and Middle East and North Africa regions (43 percent). The main reasons young feminist organisers gave for not registering their organisations include: the process is too expensive (35 percent); not being registered is a political decision (33 percent); and they face a series of legal, fiscal, and administrative burdens that hinder the registration process (30 percent).

4 ■ Girl-Led Groups Are Getting Creative About How to Receive Funds Without Registering

Some girls' initiatives are born from the girls' previous involvement as beneficiaries in larger, more established organisations, where they would have been encouraged and supported to lead their own activities, initiatives, or groups. In some cases, girls choose to eventually become independent, but more often, they remain part of the organisation. It is important to note that these girl-led groups and initiatives that are born and operate within more established organisations usually have a high degree of programmatic autonomy, though they rarely have full control over financial management.

In some cases, girls associate with a more established organisation that already has legal registration and is willing to administer the funds as fiscal agents or sponsors. This arrangement can provide a solution for many girl-led groups that would otherwise struggle to access funding due to their unregistered status. However, it also comes with complexities. By relying on a fiscal sponsor, girl-led groups are not able to administer their own funds, which can limit their autonomy and flexibility in managing resources. This arrangement may also impose restrictions or conditions on the use of funds that do not fully align with the group's priorities, which can result in a loss of agency. Moreover, girls and young feminist-led groups are at the forefront of crisis response, often addressing urgent needs that fall between the cracks of formal agencies, organisations, and governments. In these contexts, where swift action and adaptive responses are critical, reliance on a fiscal sponsor can further complicate their ability to act quickly. These groups may be working in volatile or precarious contexts, where the ability to make efficient and responsive decisions is critical.

Spotlight: GirlPowa Belize

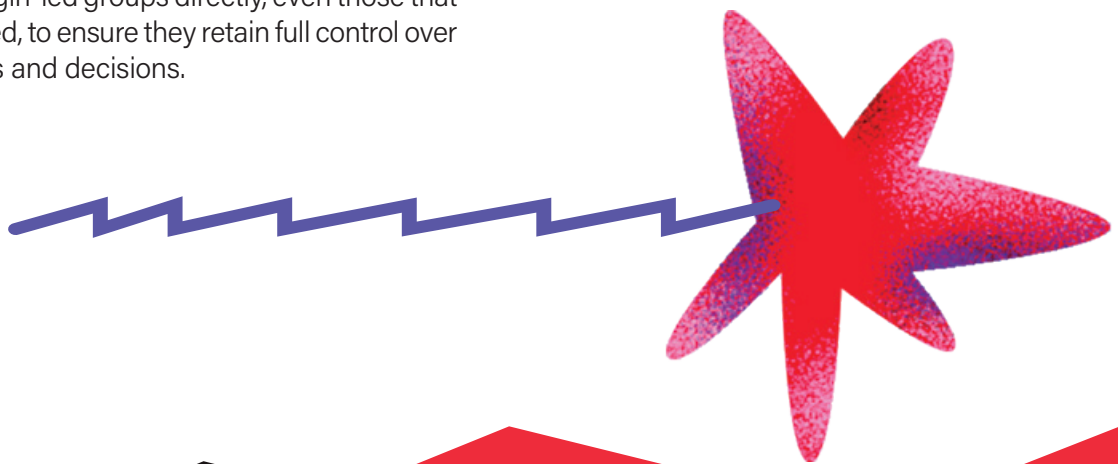
The group was founded in 2011 as a girl club within POWA, an organisation that seeks to build the capacity of girls and women and engage the community in bringing an end to violence against children. GirlPowa was created by girls that were already part of POWA and is autonomous and entirely led by the girls but receives technical and financial support. Thandiwe Diego, its founder who is now 18 years old, says the group has no plans to become an independent organisation, as there is no need for it. Members feel they have the desired autonomy over their work and they welcome the support of POWA. The added benefit is that as girls get older, they can transition into POWA without leaving their activism behind, and GirlPowa remains girl-led.

Additionally, the power dynamics inherent in fiscal sponsorship arrangements can exacerbate the complexity. Larger, more established organisations may, consciously or unconsciously, prioritise their own agendas or decision-making processes over the girl-led group's, undermining the very purpose of the partnership. This can create an unequal, hierarchical relationship that limits the girl-led group's voice and capacity to direct its own work.

Though fiscal sponsorship remains an important tool for enabling funding access, it should not be viewed as the only or ultimate solution. More funding should be directed to girl-led groups directly, even those that are unregistered, to ensure they retain full control over their resources and decisions.

“

By refusing to conform to structures that undermine their autonomy, girls are asserting their right to organise on their own terms. This highlights the urgent need for more radical, flexible funding mechanisms that do not impose these harmful bureaucratic barriers and instead support girls' organising in ways that prioritise their safety, autonomy, and power.” – Priyanka Samy, Dalit feminist activist



Spotlight: AMA Guatemala

When Agrupación Mujeres Activas (AMA) was founded, it was able to secure seed capital from Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (FCAM) without having to register given that FCAM funds unregistered groups. However, as it grew and expanded its work, it became clear that without registering there were limits to the funding it was able to obtain. AMA was interested in receiving funds from the Central American and Mexico Youth Fund (CAMY) but this required registration. That's when AMA reached out to Global Humanitaria, a Spanish INGO with local offices in Guatemala with who it had collaborated in the past. Global Humanitaria was familiar with AMA's work and believed in its members and agreed to serve as the fiscal agent. In this way AMA was able to secure funds from CAMY and other donors that required registration. With time however, AMA eventually decided to register legally to have more autonomy and greater control over its own financial resources.

Principles And Tactics Underpinning Girls' Resistance - Building Their Roadmap To Revolution(s)³

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 recognise 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.

What remains constant across all their efforts is a profound capacity to both imagine the world anew and embody what it will take to get there. This represents an invaluable strategy for transformational and political planning—not only in the present but also for future generations—while weaving together the legacies of those who came before them.

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. Some of this content in this section was first published in the Stories of Girls' Resistance, chapter 4, How girls move: The strategies and tactics of the resisters. For more information on some of these strategies/tactics visit <https://girlsresistance.org/girls-resistance/how-girls-move/>

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 reimaging 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.

“*Girls have taught us profound lessons through their principles, and tactics for resistance and dreaming. They have shown us that individual and collective care, rest, enjoyment, and well-being are essential components of sustainability as a political concept. This concept extends beyond access to resources; it requires reimagining our practices to prioritise care and celebration of ourselves. If we are not finding joy, if we are unhappy and overworked, our feminist activism cannot be sustainable. We are all contributing to and part of a legacy that connects the past and the future change we are working for.*” – Juliana Román Lozano, Colombia, Feminist Activist

For Further Learning

- Resourcing Girls and Young Feminists, Girls' Power Learning Institute, 2025.
- **“Chapter 4: How Girls Move: The Strategies and Tactics of the Resisters,”** Stories of Girls' Resistance, 2023.
 - Jessica K. Taft, **Rebel Girls: Youth Activism and Social Change Across the Americas**, 2010.
- **Inside the Circle: Building Power Through Girls' Collectives in Sierra Leone**, Purposeful, 2022.



Reflection Questions

- **When reading about the challenges girls encounter in their organising efforts, what reflections, anecdotes, and reactions come to mind?** Are there additional questions that arise when you connect their journey to your own or to that of other girls and young feminists?
- **Write down any additional challenges** that you think girls encounter in their organising based on your reflection and analysis and add these under your definition of resistance.
- **Bring your roadmap identifying your moment(s) of resistance** and reflect on whether any of the principles and tactics of girls' resistance resonate with your experiences. Are there specific ones that come to mind?
- **Are there any additional principles and tactics that you believe are missing?** Write down any additional principle and tactic of girls' resistance that you think it's missing and define it.
- **What would your work look like if you were able to embody all of the principles of and tactics outlined above?**

Accountability in Action

with and for Girls

Girls and young feminists are resisting, building, and dreaming new worlds—often against impossible odds. Their powerful work is at the forefront of systems change, crisis response, and intergenerational knowledge-sharing. While we recognise their power, we must critically examine our collective responsibility to support their work and take on the burdens they have carried for far too long. The lessons in this report makes one thing clear: girls are not just leaders of the future, they are architects of liberation today. Their resistance represents a full dismantling of all forms of oppression, and it is our responsibility to be accountable to them through our actions and long-term commitment.

Learn, amplify, and centre girls' stories, experiences, and strategies for change. This can tangibly translate to:

- Learning about the stories and contributions of girls and young feminists throughout history and as drivers of change. This also includes supporting the ongoing documentation of their experiences to both reclaim history and prevent erasure, an essential strategy in dismantling oppression.
- Ensuring that girls and young feminists are the ones shaping the narratives about their own activism, stories, and experiences..
- Move beyond surface-level representation and engage with the depth of their analysis, demands, and visions for the world—insights they have extensively shared and documented across generations and spaces. One example of this is [What Girls' Want](#).

Support and sustainably resource girls' and young feminists' organising. This can tangibly translate to:

- [Fund girls' collective work with long-term, flexible, and accessible resources that recognise the scale and significance of their contributions across all movements, sectors, and communities.](#)
- Shift power over funding and resource allocation decisions directly into the hands of girls and young feminists, as they are the experts on what they need.
- Invest in girls' dreams by moving beyond the perpetual framing that their lives must revolve solely around resistance, and instead, supporting their expansive dreams, imagination, and resistance.

Ensure that girls and young feminists are held accountable to and are an integral part of all your work, because they are. This can tangibly translate to:

- Holding yourself, your organisation, and your partnerships accountable to girls and young feminists by ensuring their work and experiences are integral to shaping the direction of your initiatives, resource allocation, and narratives. There must be ongoing reflection to prevent or address the erasure and isolation of girls and young feminists.
- Engaging girls and young feminists across the full spectrum of your work. If you are not involving them at any stage, ask yourself why; after all, they are a central and indispensable part of our society.

While these actions are key to ensuring accountability to girls and young feminists, they are not a one-time effort—they require long-term commitment and continuous engagement. The Girls' Power Learning Institute booklets 2 and 3 provide additional learning resources that expand on key recommendations. However, ongoing learning must be accompanied by a praxis of practice and community, ensuring that theory is translated into tangible, collective action.





Girls' Power
Learning Institute

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