



# WHEN THE GAP IS A CHASM: THE GENDERED EXPERIENCE OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP IN SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Efforts to reach the Sustainable Development Goals and related adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (AYSRHR) initiatives have resulted in the unprecedented mobilization of youth at all levels. Young people have become vibrant contributors and persuasive advocates for the changes that most require their energy and creativity to help achieve. And, yet female and male adolescents articulate radically different motivations, needs, and experiences with regard to their participation and leadership in AYSRHR efforts.

Young women report a range of gender-specific obstacles and problems experienced on their AYSRHR leadership paths that leave them disadvantaged and at risk. Larger social and structural inequalities coalesce with inhospitable working environments and the looming threat of coercion and violence to limit the impact of young female leaders. These problems are unusually severe for girls and young women working in AYSRHR—as they face not only the double burden of being young and female, but also the additional stigma associated with speaking openly about sexuality and sexual health.

In an effort to shed light on the experiences, perspectives, and impact of young female leaders in AYSRHR, the Youth Investment, Engagement, and Leadership (YIELD) Project is giving voice to female advocates. Almost all have multiple stories of gender-based discrimination, coercion, and violence to share. Almost none can identify any policies, structures, or systems in place to support or protect them. This is particularly inexcusable in a field devoted to promoting human rights, gender equity, and the health of women and girls.

What can we do to address these problems? To empower and support girls and young women—and level the playing field for female participants and leaders in AYSRHR? YIELD research directs the following suggestions for how to combat gender inequity and bring about positive change:

- **Find** and **equip** diverse populations of girls and young women by involving them in the design and implementation of programming.
- **Enable** young female leaders by transforming gender norms; cultivating female-friendly organizations and organizational cultures; establishing and implementing responsive safeguarding policies; mainstreaming female leadership; and adequately compensating and resourcing girls and girl-led initiatives.
- **Connect** young women to each other, and to ongoing professional opportunities, by formalizing female support networks.
- **Track** the gendered experiences, perceptions, and impacts of girls and young women working in AYSRHR, with particular attention to how gender disparities operate in local contexts and affect vulnerable populations.

The decisions girls and young women are able to make—and the ways that they not only use power, but power change in the world around them—will determine the health and wellbeing of current and future generations.

We all have a shared responsibility to enable this type of female leadership. The field of AYSRHR should not lag, but lead.

# INTRODUCTION

There are more young people today than at any point in human history. They are passionate, engaged, and committed—and the decisions girls and young women are able to make with regard to their own sexual and reproductive health will determine the future of our world. Young people have become vibrant contributors to advancing the SRHR efforts that affect them most. And yet, for a field driven by the promotion of human rights, gender equity, and the health and well-being of girls and women - the experiences of young female participants and leaders in AYSRHR efforts around the world remain distinctly unequal, unfair, and unsafe.

Girls and young women face challenges to participation and leadership in AYSRHR that their male peers do not—including unequal demands on their time, mobility, and autonomy. Inequitable norms, inhospitable professional environments, and the specter of gender-based violence limit opportunities for girls and young women everywhere. But for those growing up in traditional societies and vulnerable communities in the Global South, these constraints are more oppressive—making the need to empower and support young women more urgent.

Recent research conducted by the Youth Investment, Engagement, and Leadership Development (YIELD) Project suggests that gender imbalances may be particularly acute in the field of adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (AYSRHR)—where female and male youth leaders report different experiences working as advocates and champions.

In some sense, this is unsurprising: The recent *Lancet* special issue on advancing women in science, medicine, and global health—published this past February—highlights gender gaps across related sectors. The evidence is clear and unequivocal. Women are less likely to be global health leaders, researchers, or grant recipients—and they are equally underrepresented in the upper echelons of medical practice and the health workforce. The problem of under-representation stems from inequities in training and grant application processes, but is also linked to sexual harassment, workplace violence, and inadequate work-life supports. Coercion and violence may be especially common in the female-dominated health and social services. All of this has compounding impacts on both female leadership and female health.

These problems are unusually severe for girls and young women working in AYSRHR—as they face not only the double burden of being young and female, but also the additional stigma associated with speaking openly about sexuality and sexual health. YIELD research suggests that—in comparison to boys and young men—girls and young women are more likely to be motivated to join the field by negative personal SRHR experiences, more likely to face ongoing safety and security risks, and also more likely to consider their participation in AYSRHR a “passion” rather than a “career.” Perhaps related to this, boys and young men seem better able to leverage their participation into additional professional opportunities, higher leadership roles, and better pay. The gender differences are stark—and unacceptable in a field committed to the health and empowerment of girls and young women.

There are larger cultural factors at work here. But this is not just about changing norms: The presence of systematic discrimination and ongoing workplace violence, at all levels, means that institutional interventions are both possible and necessary. These interventions also have the potential to contribute favorably to long-term social change.

What can we do—as a field and as a community—to address these imbalances? To empower and support girls and young women—and level the playing field for female advocates and champions in AYSRHR? This white paper highlights the burdens that girls and young women bear, and the constraints that they face, while also spotlighting solutions. By giving voice to female participants and leaders in AYSRHR—honoring *their* experiences and taking seriously their proposed solutions—we hope to move the field to a more inclusive and equitable place.

*The YIELD Project.* The YIELD Project provides field-informed guidance for future action and investment in youth participation and leadership development to advance young people’s sexual and reproductive health and rights. The YIELD Project is guided by a steering committee comprised of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The Summit Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. As part of this work, the YIELD Project team has already conducted comprehensive literature reviews and program scans, as well as nearly 100 in-depth interviews with

young leaders, youth-led organizations, youth-serving organizations, researchers, and funders. The findings from this initial phase of YIELD activity can be found [here](#).

These findings include many of the reported differences in male and female participation and leadership experiences cited above. To drill down further on the issue of gender, the project team also conducted eight additional key-informant interviews, six of which were with female youth leaders currently working in the field. Often, these youth leaders were difficult to access—and our research into this issue is still incomplete. Furthermore, while we made an effort to speak with girls and young women from diverse backgrounds and geographies, our sample remains opportunistic. The paper also presents the views of these informants without verifying any substantive claims made during the interview process. As such, our findings offer a snapshot of current gender dynamics operating in the field, rather than clearly generalizable results. However, even this glimpse into the experiences and perspectives of girls and young women in AYSRHR provides a critical and compelling vision of how to propel the field—and the world—into a more equitable future.

# UNEQUAL, UNFAIR, AND UNSAFE: A DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

It is impossible to discuss solutions without first exploring the depth of the problem. In what follows, we highlight the inequitable norms and unequal demands that construct the double burden of being young and female. We then argue that these social—and structural—experiences translate into specific obstacles that hinder the advancement of girls and young women within the field of AYSRHR. Finally, we relate examples of the coercion and violence inflicted on current female youth leaders in their role as advocates and champions.

## UNEQUAL: THE DOUBLE BURDEN OF BEING YOUNG AND FEMALE

Youth voices are not always heard—a broader problem that is particularly severe for girls and young women. Every young female leader with whom we spoke cited larger social and structural constraints—including, but not limited to, inequitable gender norms—as major barriers to her participation and leadership in AYSRHR.

*Inequitable gender norms hold girls and young women back in multiple, intersecting ways.* We know what inequitable gender norms mean for girls and young women living in traditional societies or vulnerable communities in the Global South. They mean enforced limits on time, mobility, and autonomy; unequal housework and carework responsibilities; lack of support for female education and professional development; and, all too often, vulnerability to multiple forms of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment and assault, intimate-partner violence, coercion and bullying, female-genital mutilation, and child marriage. As girls age and mature, these gendered burdens and expectations often become more restricting—especially for girls and young women of low socioeconomic status, who shoulder substantial carework and even wage-work responsibilities on behalf of their families. There is also a particular stigma associated with matters related to sexual and reproductive health. Girls and young women receive less family support for AYSRHR roles. They also experience substantial community-level backlash for their involvement with AYSRHR issues, as sex and sexuality are more taboo when addressed by girls.

“We have to take into account how, culturally, SRHR or just sex is viewed as taboo, especially for women to talk about. Or argue about or support. For me, my experience has been that I’ve gone into spaces where certain things can be said by my male counterparts, and won’t be frowned upon. But if I say it, as a young woman talking about sex in such spaces, I’m usually scorned, or stigmatized, or discriminated against.”

*We cannot empower girls and young women without addressing these larger social and structural barriers.* We have no wish to dwell on these constraints, or to re-victimize girls and young women by emphasizing their powerlessness. But the fact remains that empowering young female leaders will require us to dismantle these larger social and structural barriers. Part of this starts with the individual young woman—building her capacity, encouraging her participation, and cultivating her leadership. Part of it can only be done in partnership with gatekeepers, who mediate many aspects of young women’s lives. These gatekeepers include parents, caregivers, and other family members; “duty bearers” like teachers and religious leaders; and men and boys. Often part of the problem, these gatekeepers can also become part of the solution. Efforts to transform gender norms in more equitable ways will be discussed in more detail below (see “enable,” under “leveling the playing field for girls and young women”).

“I work with networks of young people, mostly young women. And I talk with young women, and encourage them to take a stand, encourage them to be leaders. What I see, in some of these young women, depending on the culture, is that they’re very deferential to hierarchy. And men who are superior to them. And/or men, period. This is just cultural upbringing. I’m not going to be the one to change that. It’s deeply rooted. But it’s important to let women know that they can and should stand up to different structures, and should look at things with an objective lens, rather than a cultural lens.”

“It’s very important to engage parents. And if the person is married, the husband. And sometimes even if they are having relationships—we’ve tried to engage the boyfriends, actually, in sensitization sessions and orientations before starting something. Because most of the time, their mobility gets affected, if their parents or significant others are not aware of what they are doing. Especially if it’s related to SRH, since it’s quite a controversial subject.”

“We still have a long way to go in terms of training teachers and changing the perspectives of teachers. The whole idea of what a girl should be, what she should be doing—and about her mobility, and her safety, and all these things—that’s coming from the school, mostly from the teachers. Even younger teachers still talk about these things. Which indirectly limits [young women’s] mobility. It makes them scared to do something challenging, and to work until late at night. And it also comes from the parents, of course. Addressing it in the school and the family is something we need to look at. We have to create enabling environments.”

## UNFAIR: THE SPECIFIC OBSTACLES THAT FEMALE YOUTH LEADERS FACE

Inequitable norms and unequal demands contribute to young women being less confident, qualified, and professionally successful than their male peers. In this sense, social and structural barriers are the hidden factor behind many of the specific obstacles that girls and young women face as they pursue leadership roles and professional opportunities in AYSRHR.

*Young female leaders have more limited opportunities—and this translates into specific obstacles, including lack of confidence, qualifications, and status.* Patriarchal environments make girls and young women feel inadequate and insecure. They also limit the opportunities open to young female leaders, who have more difficulty accessing trainings, securing remunerative positions, and achieving ongoing recognition and promotion in AYSRHR. This, in turn, creates a vicious cycle: by making educational and professional opportunities harder to access—either through outright exclusion or lack of support for the kind of “work-life” conflicts that plague women in their reproductive years—inequitable environments rob girls and young women of the capacity to surmount their confidence issues by deliberately building their own qualifications. The result is young female leaders who are not only objectively less qualified than their male peers, but who also lack the ability to convey their value to potential employers or funders.

“In order for you to access grants, and some of these other opportunities, you have to have incredible writing skills and communication skills. Which, of course, leans more toward men because men have more educational opportunities than women. You have this imbalance in the field from the get-go.”

“I have a friend. She’s a very powerful feminist from Rwanda. She recently had a baby, and she shared her experience about how, when she was pregnant, she had been part of organizing this conference that was in Portugal. And then she had the baby. And she was still supposed to go to the conference—but she needed to go with someone who would help take care of the baby. And they said no, we don’t have the money to cover you for that.”

“I also saw and experienced a “breaking point” when life catches up with you [for women, when they have children] and you are forced to take a step back in your professional leadership roles with limited institutional support. I have seen many great female professionals leave the field because they cannot combine the demands.”

*Men are better at “talking the talk,” even if it’s often young women who are really “walking the walk”—and this, too, contributes to a vicious cycle of gender inequity in the AYSRHR workplace.* The gender imbalances cited above mean that young men are far more confident—and better equipped to promote themselves and their work—than their female peers. Some of the young female leaders with whom we spoke see the male paradigm of confident self-promotion—what one of our informants referred to as “talking the talk”—as something that girls and young women should strive to emulate in their professional lives. Others feel that the male model is too aggressive, and that the system needs to be re-configured to support women who may not be vocal in their own praise, but who are on the ground, “walking the walk,” in ways that their male colleagues are not.

“Sharing notes would help. I’m pretty sure for the male advocates there’s more sharing notes. And more interaction to see: how did you get into that space? How can I get into that space? How did you leverage, for example, to get paid to go to a conference, or get paid to speak at a conference? I feel there’s less of that for young women. We might meet at spaces, but we don’t have open and honest discussions about how we got there, or how to get access to these spaces. I also think there are fewer programs that intentionally target young women to build their capacity to access these spaces. Usually, it’s just general. And if it’s just general, they’re assuming that we’re all coming in at the same level, or coming in at the same equal footing. But we’re not. Because for the younger men, there’s more interaction and more sharing of notes—whereas probably, for the younger woman, she’s very passionate, but once she gets in this space, she doesn’t know how to make the most of it or how to leverage it.”

“Our [male youth leaders] are not shy about asking for professional opportunities beyond their volunteer positions. In one particular case, [a male volunteer] went up to the director of this organization we partner with—which he wasn’t supposed to do—he went into her office, and was like, hey, this is who I am, this is what we’re doing downstairs, I just wanted to know if you had any opportunities for jobs. Just so bold, had the audacity to do this. Or another [male youth leader] emailed one of our donors. When we communicate with our donors, we communicate very intentionally, and it’s usually a group effort. But this guy sent an email, poorly written, and was like, hey, can you fund me to go to Women Deliver? Just the audacity I see in some of these men. Young men. Who are leaders in this field. It’s not even supporting girls and young women. There are these structures and cultures that are set up that have allowed men to think it’s OK to dominate. And I don’t know how to combat that. Because it’s not just women. We have strong women; we have women who are vocal. But they’re polite. And women know their space. But men are pushy, and will keep harassing you until they get what they want. And it works. I don’t necessarily think we should teach women to do the same thing, because it’s not appropriate. But that’s how men are moving up in this world, and building careers in this space, whereas women are not . . . And, of course, I also fall for it. I say, oh, that’s such a great idea, such a great project, such great effort, thank you for doing this. This is such great work, you’re a volunteer for us, and I really appreciate it. Let me see who I can talk to, or see if I can partner you up with someone. So, because this man is in my face, I’m now thinking about him, and trying to get him opportunities. Whereas [a young female leader], for example, is doing equally incredible things, but because she’s busy doing a lot of the work and not marketing herself, I don’t know as much of what she’s doing. Because she’s actually on the ground working, rather than advertising her amazing work.”

These shifts in emphasis aside, our informants are unanimous in their belief that differences in confidence, qualifications, work patterns, and self-promotion are creating severe gender imbalances—both in current compensation and access to future opportunities. The cycle is, once again, self-fulfilling: as male youth leaders advance, and female youth leaders lag behind, these gaps in resume and accomplishment compound each other—radically limiting the ability of girls and young women to succeed or support themselves with their AYSRHR work. Unfortunately, the fact that girls and young women are often the backbone of youth-led and youth-serving organizations—in part because of their reluctance to take time off to pursue professional development opportunities (for fear of either harming the institution or shifting the burden of their work onto colleagues)—rarely seems to matter. Altering these dynamics is the next frontier of empowerment work. Strategies for better compensating and rewarding young female leaders for their contributions will be discussed in more detail below (see “enable,” under “leveling the playing field for girls and young women”).

“Compensation is a major issue. Volunteering, or volunteerism, is taken for granted in a way. Because lots of young women—stereotypically, or because of how they are brought up—they’re quite good at documenting, or doing reports, doing support, writing proposals. And they end up doing that kind of stuff more. Whereas young men mostly end up conducting the sessions, and meeting people, traveling and doing that part. The compensation is better for them.”

“That’s the biggest reason I sometimes don’t go out for professional development opportunities. Because I know all the work I’d be missing. Even though my boss would let me go. I don’t want to miss work knowing I’d put other people in a difficult position.”

“It’s important to make sure that girls, especially, are given specific positions—a title or anything, that makes them feel like, yes, I do have some part in affecting change with this project. And in thinking about money, I think it’s important to cultivate that trust to put the money in their hands first. I think a lot of the girls that I worked with, and interacted with—they were very conscious about how to spend the money and how much things cost, but they weren’t given that trust among program leaders.”

## UNSAFE: THE COERCION AND VIOLENCE THAT FEMALE YOUTH LEADERS EXPERIENCE

Girls and young women are also exposed to greater threats as a result of their AYSRHR work. Female youth leaders experience higher rates of violence and coercion in their professional lives—and they are often ill-equipped to manage incidents when they arise. These threats harm and derail young female leaders, while further limiting their impact as advocates and champions in AYSRHR.

*Girls and young women face widespread violence and coercion in multiple professional contexts—and are poorly supported in the aftermath of these incidents.* The young female leaders with whom we spoke described several specific incidents of violence and coercion—ranging from workplace and cyber bullying to sexual harassment at international conferences. Several of these young women expressed disappointment at the lack of support they received from supervisors and supervisory organizations. None had undergone protective training, and few were aware of the existence of any policies or reporting systems in place to protect them. Many smaller organizations do not have rigorous safeguarding policies; many larger organizations require young women to cut through so much red tape that the process can become re-victimizing.

These stories are difficult to hear. We spotlight them here to raise awareness and provide necessary context for our subsequent discussion of more effective safeguarding strategies (see “enable,” under “leveling the playing field for girls and young women,” below).

“Of course, physically, in real life, you face threats and violence. And now, increasingly, in the online world, on social media, young women and girls are being threatened. Especially if they talk about family planning, SRH, gender equality. They are ridiculed. There are even death threats. Some of these things are quite serious.”

“There was this time when I was working in a far-away place in India. And there was a person who was reporting to me, who assaulted me sexually. And my boss was a woman, and when I talked to her about it—and the thing is [the perpetrator] was amongst his colleagues, and they were making fun of me for not interacting with him after that. You know that kind of weird monkey culture that these people have. And I was trying to talk to her about that, and she just made a passing remark, and told me not to talk to her about that. That’s a failure. Of everything she stood for at that point. Being this educated, empowered woman who is like, I will not take any nonsense from anyone. Then I thought about reporting it to other people. But [her comments] prevented me from talking about it. I was very young.”

“Once, I was home alone and we had a house break-in. I had no support from [my organization] and no support from work. I had to deal with police in Zambia and insurance internationally. The people at work just made jokes about it. And it was heartbreaking because I needed support in that situation. Both organizations made me stay in the house. They didn’t make me feel like I was being heard. And I think that was the most frustrating. Because I would fill out forms about how I felt and I tried to contact the psychologist they connected me with... But there’s a difference between seeing and looking, and being heard and being listened to.”

“Being in these spaces and being a young woman who is talking about sex and SRH, it breeds an environment where sexual harassment is allowed or done. Because I’m very open about my advocacy and about sex, I’ve found that the men who are equally in those spaces, and probably have more power and more influence in those spaces, have taken the opportunity to sexually harass me and comment on my body inappropriately. This happens at international conferences, and at very high-level spaces, and you’re not sure if you want to address it. Because there is a bigger picture that you’re advocating for.”

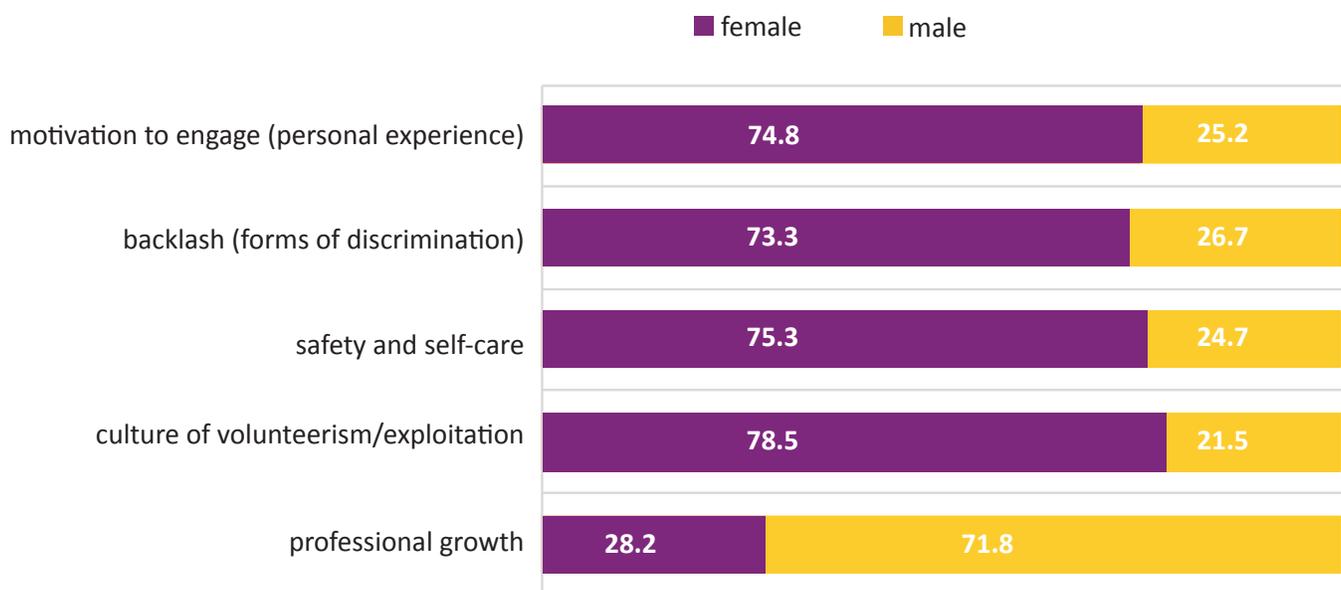
# A LOOK AT THE DATA

As noted above, female youth leaders have different experiences as advocates and champions than their male peers. These differences can be seen in the macro-level data. As we analyzed qualitative data collected over the course of the YIELD project, it became clear that some of the “codes” that we created—or the lenses that we used to interpret the data—applied much more frequently to the responses of female informants. This was true for codes like motivation to engage (personal experience), suggesting that young women were more likely to engage with AYSRHR efforts as the result of personal, and often negative, life experiences; backlash (forms of discrimination), suggesting that young women were more likely to refer to backlash and discrimination that they experienced as a result of this engagement; and safety and self-care, suggesting that young women perceive themselves to be more vulnerable, as a result of their AYSRHR work, than young men do.

The only code that applied more frequently to the responses of male informants was professional growth. (This is illustrated visually below, in a graph that depicts the percentage of female versus male responses assigned to each code.)

Taken together, this data suggests that young men experience greater professional rewards for engaging in AYSRHR efforts than young women do—and that young women run higher risks as a result of their engagement. This is a reflection of the larger gender imbalances described in this report.

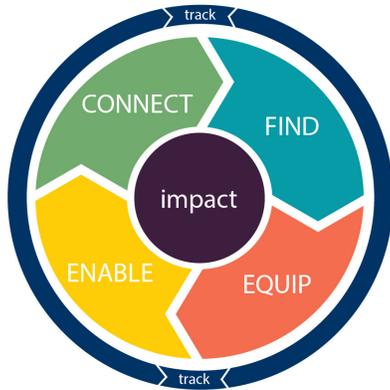
## CODE APPLICATIONS, BROKEN DOWN BY GENDER



# LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD: AN EXPLORATION OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

In describing the problem, we have explored the complex interrelationships between larger social and structural contexts and the specific barriers and constraints that girls and young women navigate as they pursue leadership roles in AYSRHR. In what follows, we spotlight solutions according to the YIELD process map, which highlights strategies to:

## Youth Participation Process Map



**FIND:** identify and engage young people in all their diversity as participants in AYSRHR efforts across the ecosystem;

**EQUIP:** provide training to build youth knowledge, skills, and capabilities;

**ENABLE:** foster supportive environments that allow young people to exercise their agency and become genuine contributors to AYSRHR efforts;

**CONNECT:** create both pipelines and pathways for young participants to enter the YIELD cycle, as well as engage in repeated cycles in order to age “up” rather than age “out” of the field; and

**TRACK:** develop and implement monitoring and evaluation strategies that document the results of youth participation at different levels.

## FIND & EQUIP

A critical way to identify and engage girls and young women as participants in the AYSRHR ecosystem—and build their knowledge, skills, and capabilities so that they become leaders in the field—is to involve young women in the design and implementation of programming.

By reaching out to existing groups of girls and young women—and using their knowledge of local needs to identify vulnerable populations and shape flexible, responsive programming—we can create participation and leadership opportunities for more diverse cross-sections of young female leaders. We can also adapt our training programs—and our evolving institutional reporting and support systems—to better respond to the specific barriers and threats that young women face.

*The best way to find and equip girls and young women is to involve them in what we do.* Virtually all of our female respondents called for greater inclusion of girls and young women in the design and implementation of programming. This could mean outreach to existing groups of girls and young women, as a means of identifying vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations within local communities; formative research with these same groups, prior to the development of programming; greater inclusion of young women in program design and delivery; expanded roles for girl graduates as they age up into positions of greater programmatic or institutional responsibility; or the mainstreaming of young women’s leadership within organizations. Some of this will be discussed in more detail below (see “enable” and “connect” under “leveling the playing field for girls and young women”)—and the specifics of what needs to be done will vary by context. But this does not diminish the importance of the broader task: involving girls and young women in this way is crucial to the identification, engagement, and empowerment of young female leaders.

“Definitely engage them at the beginning. Approach when you’re even thinking about creating a training. Connect with a network that has an existing group of young women. And say, hey, we’re thinking of making this training—do you want to be part of the entire creation of it?”

We cannot effectively empower girls—by building their capacities, responding flexibly to their context-specific needs, serving their evolving interests, or cultivating their leadership—without including them in the processes by which we

do this. This type of involvement cannot simply be tokenistic—and engaging girls and young women in meaningful ways requires non-trivial investments of time, effort, and resources. But many small, grassroots organizations are already reaping the benefits of this approach. **Girls Legacy, in Zimbabwe**, equips young women to become advocates in their local communities by giving them leadership roles in girl-directed clubs; these clubs forge lasting relationships with girls that extend from puberty through older adolescence. **BRAVE, in South Africa**, cultivates a similar sense of “permanent belonging” by allowing girls multiple entry points into the program, and giving “senior girls” increasing influence over program design and implementation. Over time, the girls and young women in these programs—and many others like them—develop the skills and confidence necessary to become change agents and leaders in their local communities.

“With my previous organization, particularly, I worked a lot with young girls and women, in the tea plantation sector, the estate sector, which is a marginalized community in Sri Lanka. We had this program where we trained them, provided them information, built their capacity. The girls were quite shy to talk about things in the beginning. But once they were given responsibilities, and skills, and the opportunity to practice those skills, they realized that people valued them, and recognized them, and respected them. People would come to them, and ask questions, and they felt like they knew something and could help others. And they wanted to lead after that. They wanted to do their own programs. If there was an issue in the community, for example, they started mobilizing the team themselves, and intervening. It’s been one year since I stopped working in that area. But I learned, recently, that some of them have even expressed an interest in going for elections in their provincial councils. And they’re interested in getting into politics in their areas.”

## ENABLE

In order to enable girls and young women to act as contributors and leaders in AYSRHR, we must tackle five interrelated tasks:

1. the transformation of gender norms;
2. the cultivation of female-friendly organizations and organizational cultures;
3. the establishment and implementation of responsive safeguarding policies;
4. the mainstreaming of female leadership; and
5. the adequate compensation and resourcing of girls and girl-led initiatives/organizations.

*The transformation of gender norms is necessary for the creation of more supportive, inclusive, and equitable environments for girls and young women—but effectively engaging male allies remains difficult.* As previously noted, inequitable gender norms—and larger social, cultural, and structural constraints—constitute major underlying barriers to female leadership in AYSRHR. This makes norm change a fundamental aspect of female empowerment. Part of this work must be done with girls and young women—through explicitly gender-transformative programming and the type of girl involvement described above. Ultimately, however, empowering girls and young women is not enough, especially in the absence of a broader enabling environment. We also need to involve gatekeepers—including parents, caregivers and family members; “duty bearers,” like teachers and religious leaders; and men and boys. These gatekeepers have traditionally been part of the problem, but can also become part of the solution, given intentional outreach efforts and continued engagement. Some organizations are already seeing progress in this area: **Save the Children** works with parents, caregivers, and community members through its *Choices, Voices, Promises* and *Growing Up Great* programs; and **Feminist Approach to Technology, in India**, has increased buy-in for its girl-only STEM programming through a combination of door-to-door outreach efforts, weekly community visits, and regular dialogues with families. All of this work helps to create enabling environments for girls and young women working in AYSRHR.

“These gatekeepers actually contribute to the gender inequality we see. The way we need to engage them is to make sure they really understand the importance of gender equality, so that they can continue to support women—especially in these young, career-driven years—to strive for more leadership roles. And to focus on career. Each one of these gatekeepers has a different role. I think parents have a role in making sure that their young girls stay in school, and are supported enough that they can build a career without the pressure or the burden to get married or find a family to quote-unquote “take care of her.” That’s a parent’s or a caregiver’s role. Community members need to create more spaces for young women to participate in different activities. Whether that’s volunteering, sports, other types of industries, tech, developing, trade jobs, whatever. Right now, cultural

barriers are sustained and upheld by community members. And as we know, there are a lot of cultural barriers that women face. At every stage of a woman's life, these gatekeepers could be playing a role."

That said, young female leaders differ in their thoughts about how to effectively involve boys and young men. Some of the most significant gatekeepers in young women's lives are young men—their boyfriends, husbands, and brothers. All of our respondents recognized the need to engage this population, as gender-norm transformation cannot happen in the absence of male allies. But some also expressed hesitation about how, exactly, to involve boys and young men. These young female leaders argued that men tend to take over the spaces they enter—and that their involvement should be clearly limited to an "allied" role, to avoid drowning out the voices of girls and young women. Putting girls and young women at the center of these discussions will likely be critical to their ongoing success.

"We need to start by identifying #HeForShe, male allies who are already supporting girls and young women. Then they can become the champions for how to develop these key messages. They know best how to reach out to other men. We need allies who disseminate or step down the information to their fellows. I think that would work to really support girls and young women."

"We need to involve boys and men, but we also need to take more caution about how they are involved, especially in SRH matters. I really want them to be involved as allies. But they shouldn't be taking center stage, and being the center of attention in telling their stories or their experiences. Because we know that their experiences are valid, but they're not the same as that of a girl or a young woman. So, finding a balance in terms of involving them, but also making sure that the girls and young women are still at the center of those discussions, and still at the center of the solutions that are being made."

*Girls and young women will never reach their true potential as advocates and champions in AYSRHR if we do not do more to cultivate girl-friendly organizations and organizational cultures.* This means establishing and implementing institutional policies and practices that are female-friendly, and that help young women manage life transitions, balance carework responsibilities, and achieve ongoing professional development. Possible strategies include, but are not limited to, instituting formal mentoring arrangements (discussed in more detail below, in "connect" under "leveling the playing field for girls and young women"); providing explicit professional development opportunities, specifically geared toward girls and young women in their availability and content; allowing flexible work hours or time-sharing arrangements; and even providing paid leave, maternity benefits, or subsidized childcare. The goal should be to transform organizational cultures—and commit to supporting girls and young women, from a young age onwards, as they manage the gendered demands of their personal and professional lives.

The field of AYSRHR is predicated on gender equity and committed to the health and empowerment of girls and young women. As such, it should not lag, but lead: Institutions working in AYSRHR should be at the vanguard of the movement to create girl-friendly organizational cultures. Nor is this an impossible dream: **Tiempo de Juego, in Colombia**, is a small, grassroots organization that has reinforced its commitment to empowering girls by modeling gender equity institutionally (through its pay scales, the composition of its leadership team, and the creation of a standing Gender Group that facilitates this on an ongoing basis). Public sector partnerships can also be beneficial: in recognition of the burden of unpaid carework and the need to retain a productive female workforce, **the government of Ethiopia** now requires government institutions to set up child-care facilities for children up to four years old.

"I think one thing that would be so key for me is more professional development opportunities. There are so many out there, but they're so hard to access sometimes, if you aren't part of networks already."

"We're not giving women many choices when there aren't alternatives. In order to have spaces that are more supportive of girls' and young women's participation and leadership, you need to have other structures in place to support their lives. Specifically, in AYSRHR, that rings true. The space is dominated by non-profits—and non-profits don't pay the greatest, especially if we're talking about youth organizations. Especially if we're talking about organizations that are led by young individuals who are struggling to find funding, especially operational funding. They just don't provide that kind of maternity support—or generous leaves for sick days, or care-taking, or whatever else women have to go through."

“Work-life balance is always an issue, particularly if you have a family, kids, and relatives who need your support. Any intervention that eases the unpaid carework burden for women really makes a difference. This could be daycare facilities, technologies for cooking or washing, or many other things.”

*A crucial part of enabling girls and young women is keeping them safe.* Given the violence and coercion that young female leaders experience in their working lives, it is clear that we need to better protect girls and young women. This means more effectively managing threats. Our young female respondents spoke repeatedly of the need to institute more explicit, effective, and responsive organizational safeguarding policies—that include formal reporting and support systems. Many of these young women were unaware of the existence of any policies or procedures in place to protect them, or any mechanisms by which they could seek redress in the aftermath of incidents of sexual harassment or gender-based violence. Most fledgling, youth-led organizations in this sector do not have any policies, procedures, or systems of this kind; some larger organizations with such mechanisms re-victimize young women by requiring them to cut through too much red tape. Formal safeguarding policies, reporting mechanisms, and support systems are equally necessary in environments like international conferences, where the incidence of sexual harassment is high. Our training in this area is also weak: young women are not being adequately equipped to recognize and respond to workplace threats, and young men are not being adequately trained to recognize and overcome the biases and assumptions that permit them to perpetrate discrimination and violence. Our training and organizational systems need to be strengthened if we are to stop gender-based violence in the world of AYSRHR work.

“We have to be very intentional, very explicit, about how this is a sexual-harassment-free space. And these are the rules, and if anyone feels like they’ve been sexually harassed, these are the spaces you can report to—I feel like that’s something that most conferences, or bigger platforms, don’t really take into account. But you’re bringing together thousands of people in one place. You might have someone who is working in a field or an organization that is about reproductive health, but that doesn’t mean that he holds the same values or notions. I think we need to be very explicit, in such spaces, about making sure girls and young women feel safe. So you feel like, if this ever happens to you, there are reporting processes that you can go to. That is something that I would love to see for other conferences and in other spaces that we get to be a part of. Because there’s a lot of harassment that happens in such spaces that probably other organizations and partners are not aware of.”

“I think we have to build capacity, in young women and girls, on how to tackle bullies. Especially in online settings, how to tackle bullies and how to respond to these things or not to respond to them. How not to internalize them, and keep doing this work and not get discouraged. I think every young woman needs to understand cyber-security, and what options there are, especially if she’s vocal. One small thing can demotivate young women leaders, and they completely give up their careers when that happens. But we are still struggling to have good policies at the institutional level, or at the national level. And in terms of facing physical violence, if there are young women volunteering or working in the field of SRH, there have to be company policies or organization policies against sexual harassment. And not just that, but those policies need to be closely monitored. To encourage women to make complaints and speak out.”

Organizations will need support in doing this. Very few seem to be adequately protecting girls and young women—by training them to recognize and respond to threats, adopting formal safeguarding policies, or providing adequate supports and mechanisms of redress in the aftermath of incidents. Youth-led organizations, in particular, may need help creating the kinds of institutional policies and structures necessary to effectively support girls and young women. This is an area where funders can play a significant role: by restricting the funds that flow to non-compliant organizations—or providing ongoing support for policy creation, organizational development, and internal trainings—they can give the “nudges” necessary to ensure that organizational cultures evolve in ways that protect and support young female leaders.

“Every organization needs to have a policy about this. If we’re looking specifically at youth-led organizations, that are still building their infrastructure, I can guarantee that many of them don’t have a policy about this. They’re still building out HR policies, some of the more basic policies, or their bylaws and constitution. This is something that’s regarded as extra. It’s seen as a VIP feature of an organization, when it should be part of the main package when you’re going to have any sort of organization. I think we should do something to make sure there is a feminist policy, or a sexual harassment policy. Maybe they can’t get access to funds unless they show their sexual

harassment policy or their feminist policy. But also in order to do that, you have to provide support and resources in order to help organizations create those kinds of policies. When we think of people in this space, the passion really is what's leading them. What we could benefit from, as youth-led organization, is support from an organization—saying, hey, here are the policies we've drafted up, would you like to take them, modify them, use them for yourself? That would be very, very helpful. Because then we don't need to find donor resources to hire a lawyer to help us create policies that already exist in organizations we're affiliated with. So, at the very basic level, a policy to help with sexual harassment, to help with some of these risks that women face. Or a feminist policy, to be a little more all-encompassing. And then to actually enact and enforce that policy. Encourage or help fund an organization's own internal trainings, or attendance at other trainings on these topics. That would be amazing."

*Another critical part of enabling girls and young women is mainstreaming female leadership.* Supporting girls and young women also means mainstreaming female leadership. Many of our respondents believe that "if it is girl-led, that means that it is girl-friendly"—and emphasize the importance of propelling women into power at all levels, including the highest echelons of leadership. The young female leaders with whom we spoke believe that women look at things differently—and often have a more flexible, empathetic, and inclusive leadership style than their male peers. This, in turn, fosters female-friendly organizational cultures and better support for girls and young women on leadership trajectories. We have not done any empirical research to support these claims—but the fact that all of our respondents share these basic perceptions suggests that girls and young women feel more comfortable and supported in female-led organizations. This, combined with the role that female role models have in empowering girls and young women, hints at the ongoing value of supporting girl-led work.

"I'd say leadership styles differ. For the girls, or for the young women leaders, there's more empathy. There's more passion. There's more investment in personal relationships. And there's more flexibility, as well. That's what I'd say are the major differences I've seen. And more compassion and more involvement of participants. In terms of—OK, so we need to make this decision, do we want to consult girls on what they need or what they think, and see what they can contribute to this? And also in terms of just general emotional well-being. Acknowledging that there will be burnout and that you need to take care of yourself."

"I'll talk from my own experience, from what I've seen in our organization. Apart from my day job, my friends and I started an NGO that supports girls and young women who dropped out of school, either because of lack of support, or because they had babies or got pregnant. What I've seen that's unique to women, and that's worked for us, is flexibility. Which is something that's hard to go by if you're getting funding from a donor. So, I've been flexible enough to say, OK, even though we want to just support girls by giving them school fees—here's a girl who has a baby, and she needs daycare. Then, we pay for the daycare, so we free her time, and she's able then to go to school. The other thing that I've seen is more passion. There's more passion because there's more connectedness from the girls who actually founded the initiative, and who are doing this work for other girls. So, there's more connectedness, and there's more understanding and personal relationships that are formed with the participants. Because you can relate to what they're going through. It might not be the same story, but you can relate, because you're all growing up and living in the same context and society."

"Women recognize other people's needs, and other people's scenarios and contexts, at much deeper level than men. In my opinion. And, as a result, the coherence and culture of the team is a lot healthier. Because there's empathy and understanding. When your leader can understand what you're going through—and can say, yeah, that's fine that you have to take the next month off—or hey, I understand that this is not your passion, how can we make sure that it still gets done? That level of understanding creates a harmony in the team that helps you move forward. I think women are really, really good about that. I think our biggest impact, as [a girl-led organization], is that we've been able to survive and create this network of young people, who feel that they can find a safe space to advocate for SRH and be united with other young people who think like them, and who have the same passions as them, so we can move forward together as a team. And that's a huge, huge win. And a direct example of what happens when an organization is women-led. It survives and it works. There's a different dynamic when you talk about power and women versus power and men. I think women look at power differently than men do. I think stronger teams are the result of female leadership and girl-led initiatives."

*We also need to fairly compensate girls and young women for their work—and shift the funding paradigm to get more money into the hands of girl-led initiatives and organizations.* In order to encourage female leadership in AYSRHR, it is necessary to better compensate young women’s work. As previously noted, the ways that girls and young women “walk the walk” rather than “talking the talk” often mean that they are poorly compensated in relation to their male peers. This culture of behind-the-scenes volunteerism makes it difficult for girls and young women to support themselves with their AYSRHR work—and limits the impact of that work by requiring them to split time and focus between multiple professional roles. It also excludes more vulnerable girls and women from leadership positions in this sector. Organizations like Asia Safe Abortion Partnership, in Sri Lanka, compensate girls and young women for their time—and the Young Women’s Project gives salaries to all of the young people on its staff, as part of its core commitment to equity. Providing this level of compensation, across AYSRHR initiatives, would take seriously the field’s commitment to empowering young women and nurturing their leadership.

“It’s really hard. For most of us, it’s our passion. Activism is not paying our day-to-day lives. It’s something that we’re doing on the side, and our day jobs don’t understand or appreciate our activism. It’s really hard sometimes to work in such spaces, and to convince people—I really want to do this, I’m passionate about this, or this would benefit the organization in this way. If they deny you leave, then you’re not going to access those spaces. I’ve just been refused leave to attend the African Regional Forum on SDGs from my boss—because he doesn’t understand why that is important.”

“In retrospect, I feel like young single women working on global SRHR are a convenient workforce. We will go anywhere and do anything for little pay because we believe in the work. But I experienced some genuine risks and was asked to travel to places that made me feel uncomfortable without any safety net.”

“I think young women leaders need to be paid. Even the youth organization that we have—we don’t have much funding, but we try to pay every service that they provide, every activity they do, at least to a certain extent. Compensation and payment are very necessary.”

Another part of this is shifting the funding paradigm to get more money into the hands of girl-led initiatives and organizations. Girl-led efforts are chronically under-funded—and often have difficulty meeting the application requirements of traditional grant-making organizations. Registration, grant writing, and impact documentation can be particular barriers for girls and young women in the philanthropic space. Organizations like **FRIDA: The Young Feminist Fund** and the **Girls First Fund** are disrupting this paradigm, and distributing more funds to girls and girl-led initiatives. Youth-led organizations like the **International Youth Alliance for Family Planning** are also circumventing the system in productive ways—by carrying the registration burden for smaller, grassroots groups, to which they directly disperse funds. But institutions like these are still few and far between, and girl-led efforts remain starved for resources. This means that even relatively small infusions of funds would have a tremendous impact on the landscape and impact on girl-led organizations.

“In India, it’s very hard to get registered. The process is a bureaucratic nightmare. I myself have faced this problem. The registration process and the paperwork—it’s a nightmare. So, finding a way to fund non-registered organizations, there’s a way to circumvent this. Like by reaching out to an organization that employs you. Or just funding non-registered organizations and women-led movements. That would be very useful. And then identifying criteria—that you want to give funding to women-led organizations, for example, that work on women’s issues, or are run by under-30-year-old women. And have specific grants focused on that. Just give funding to ideas and let them grow into something. The person who is actually leading the intervention should have some background in SRHR. But if someone is trying to do something good in the community, just fund that. There is so much money in the world right now. And a little bit of that money could go to these women working in communities.”

## CONNECT & TRACK

In order to create pipelines and pathways for girls and young women who want to grow as advocates and leaders—and age “up” rather than “out” of AYSRHR work—we need to establish formal female support networks that connect young women to each other, as well as to ongoing professional opportunities. The existence of these networks may also allow us to better understand the gender dynamics operating in the field and more effectively track the impact of girls and girl-led work.

*Organizations should deliberately foster connections between women—as these connections allow them to support and learn from one another, while advancing in the field.* Our young female respondents emphasized the value of formal mentoring arrangements as a means of instilling confidence, shoring up support, sharing learning, and identifying ongoing professional opportunities. Peer, near-peer, and intergenerational mentoring arrangements are all potentially helpful, depending on context. But if they are to be successful, these arrangements must be both thoughtful and formalized. Current mentoring efforts are frequently described as informal, benevolent supports provided by overworked female staff members. In order to make these relationships meaningful and sustainable, organizations should explicitly recognize their value by providing related assistance, compensation, and incentives.

**FRIDA: The Young Feminist Fund** has particular success mobilizing slightly-older, local, female advisors to work with young female grantees; these advisors share cultural and linguistic backgrounds with their mentees, and often have the additional advantage of intimate familiarity with local contexts. **The Meri Mentorship and Leadership Program, in Ethiopia**, takes a different approach—and pays older female professionals to mentor younger women. For organizations that provide expanded roles for girl graduates as they age “up” into positions of greater programmatic or institutional responsibility, near-peer mentoring arrangements may make the most sense. Mainstreaming female leadership—or encouraging the formation of specific girl networks and women’s collectives—also creates additional opportunities to foster connections between women.

“I’ve always wanted a mentor, but I still don’t have a mentor. [My organization] has a mentor program, but the process is very voluntary, and I don’t think the people they were pairing me up with were really thinking about how the connection would work. They were more like checking it off. I want someone who isn’t just plopped down for me with similar shared experiences, but who will really make me think about things that I haven’t yet.”

*The formation of explicit girl networks and support structures may also help us better understand the gendered constraints that young women face—while allowing us to more effectively track the impact of girl-led work.* One of the major takeaways of YIELD data in this area is the need to conduct more and better research around gender inequity and inequality in the AYSRHR world of work—so that we can better understand the ways that gendered dynamics affect local contexts and vulnerable populations. Only then can we implement solutions and monitor progress. One of the best, early ways to do this may be to involve girls and young women in our monitoring and evaluation efforts—so that they can learn from each other in more formalized ways. This would have the added benefit of allowing us to tap into the sustained connections and accumulated learning present in girl networks and women’s collectives. These groups are a valuable resource. In allowing us to maintain connections with individual young women over time, they could give us additional insight into the experiences, perceptions, and impacts of young female leaders working in the field of AYSRHR.

“Documentation is key. We should be recording our experiences. When we do projects, we collect human interest stories—or “most significant change” stories—for the participants, the people we work with. But we don’t record the same experiences for the people who worked on the project. It could be staff; it could be volunteers. We need to record their experience as well. How was it to do the project? What were the specific challenges? What were the measures they took to address them? It has to be both. And it’s very important to record. It helps a lot, to learn from each other.”

# CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Girls and young women face multiple, intersecting barriers to their participation and leadership in AYSRHR efforts. These barriers include larger social and structural inequalities, specific professional constraints, and widespread coercion and violence. All of this limits the ability of girls and young women to function as change agents in their communities.

YIELD research suggests that, in the field of AYSRHR, gender inequity is both pervasive and damaging. Almost all of the female leaders we interviewed have multiple stories of gender-based discrimination, coercion, and violence. Almost none can identify any policies, structures, or systems in place to protect them. The few who tried to get help were either ignored or re-victimized by the very institutions that were meant to protect them. This is inexcusable—especially in a field devoted to promoting human rights, gender equity, and the health of women and girls.

What can we do—as a field and as a community—to address these problems? To empower and support girls and young women—and level the playing field for female advocates and champions in AYSRHR? While the provisional nature of our research has not allowed us to identify—or test—the entire universe of possible solutions, we offer the following suggestions for how to combat gender inequity and bring about positive change:

- *Find and equip* diverse populations of girls and young women by involving them in the design and implementation of programming.
- *Enable young female leaders* by transforming gender norms; cultivating female-friendly organizations and organizational cultures; establishing and implementing responsive safeguarding policies; mainstreaming female leadership; and adequately compensating and resourcing girls and girl-led initiatives.
- *Connect* young women to each other, and to ongoing professional opportunities, by formalizing female support networks.
- *Track* the gendered experiences, perceptions, and impacts of girls and young women working in AYSRHR, with particular attention to how gender disparities operate in local contexts and affect vulnerable populations.

When girls and young women are able to participate and lead, they have the potential to revolutionize the SRHR field.

We all have a shared responsibility to enable this type of female leadership. Individuals can do this by advocating for more equitable gender norms—and supporting the individual girls and young women in their lives. Organizations can do it by involving girls and young women in the design and implementation of programming; cultivating girl-friendly organizational cultures; and adequately protecting, nurturing, and resourcing young female leaders. And researchers can do it by more accurately, and innovatively, tracking the contributions girls and young women—as well as the impacts of girl-led work.

Funders have a particularly crucial role to play. If the gender dynamics described in this report are to change, funders must not only support girl-led initiatives and female-friendly organizations—but also use their power to nudge other organizations toward change. Only in this way can institutions and institutional cultures become more responsive to the needs of girls and young women. Only in this way can we create a more equal, fair, safe, and inclusive world.

## **YIELD Project Issue Paper**

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