A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

Programming With and For Very Young Adolescent Girls

EMpower

INTRODUCTION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Girls[1] between the ages of 10 and 14 stand at the doorstep of a tumultuous life stage. The beginning of adolescence brings with it physical and emotional changes; social norms are consolidated, and for those living in poverty or denied a nurturing environment, these transitions can be even more unsettling.

For those of us working to empower marginalized girls, a better understanding of how to support girls during this phase of their lives is essential. Very young adolescent (VYA) girls may be viewed as "safe," having escaped the health risks of early childhood before hurtling into the better acknowledged risks of later adolescence. But VYA girls are actively developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors that will determine their future well-being. This makes early adolescence a crucial window of opportunity for primary prevention.

In the past decade there has been an increasing focus on broadly working with adolescent girls; the literature reveals that the majority of programs are designed for and reaching older girls, 14-19. With the belief that, investing earlier or younger in the life-cycle of girls, would lead to better, more transformational outcomes, EMpower set out to learn more so that we could do more.

We believe that programming for VYA girls is ideally situated to have a positive and lasting impact. Providing resources and targeted support during this critical period will shape both how girls come to view themselves and how their lives unfold.

To state the obvious: a 10-year-old girl is significantly different from a 16-year-old. Yet, a review of global research and program practice points to the continued need to highlight and advance programming and investment approaches specific to VYA girls. To delve deeper, EMpower worked with independent research consultants to explore what works in current program practices broadly, and gain a clearer understanding of its grantee partners' work in four different geographic regions. Through literature reviews, program scans, an online survey of EMpower grantees, key-informant interviews with global practitioners and researchers, and participatory activities with girls, the project found programming specifically with and for VYA girls that was more cultivated and advanced than anticipated.

VYA girls across the world share common issues and perspectives, but local realities shape how programs can effectively address the specific social, cultural, health and economic challenges that girls confront daily. Some girls face the prospect of early marriage, some live in areas beset by violence, and others struggle with the cultural stigma attached to living with HIV. The solutions to these problems are as diverse as the individuals and communities in which they take place. However, a synthesis of the data gathered throughout this project formed the basis of six key findings:

1. **Local grassroots organizations are doing innovative, targeted work with VYA girls— to a much greater degree than previously realized.**
   Local grassroots organizations are a current benchmark for best practices in VYA programming. Programs run by local organizations demonstrate a deep understanding of how to support and empower girls in their communities. These programs have moved to reach younger girls, and have also become more integrated over time.

2. **Meaningful involvement of VYA girls is essential to success.**
   The organizations with the best outcomes involve girls in every aspect of the programming cycle—from design and delivery, to evaluation and scale. The level and type of girl involvement varies. Strategies include the

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1. We define girl as anyone from the age of 10-19 who identifies as a girl. We recognize that this is a simplistic definition considering the personal journey that many young people are on with regards to their gender identity. Furthermore, we appreciate the increased barriers that young people from marginalized backgrounds face in embracing their gender identity of choice in relation to social norms, economic conditions and community expectations.

engagement of girls in organizational decision-making, their participation in program design and delivery, and their partnership as co-researchers. These efforts are integral to girl-centered decision-making and responsive programming.

3. **Families and communities need to be engaged, even when this is not easy.**
To reach VYA girls, programs need to cultivate trusting relationships with families and communities. This can be done through activities such as street plays, family fun days, health fairs and school presentations; programming specifically designed for parents and community members; or individual home visits. Forging these connections requires sustained effort, but the returns on program effectiveness are manifold.

4. **Programming should be dynamic, and evolve in response to the changing needs and interests of girls.**
VYA programs should have some common content, including on puberty, menstrual education and hygiene, and bodily integrity. However, the most effective programs are tailored to specific contexts, and respond flexibly to the evolving needs, interests and capacities of girls. Sometimes this requires

age-differentiation in programming, and sometimes it involves finding creative ways to include boys.

5. **Intentional measures to safeguard girls are critical to program success.**
Successful programs ensure the safety and security of the girls who participate, and employ high ethical standards. Most organizations that work with VYA girls have clearly-defined child safeguarding policies and practices in place.

6. **Strong links between grassroots and global VYA efforts would help propel the field of VYA girl programming and research forward.**
Scaling local programs and replicating grassroots models can be challenging. Some organizations are exploring pathway programs and peer-to-peer leadership approaches as they expand their programs elsewhere. But the evidence base is limited, and building monitoring and evaluation capacity is essential to growth. Global and local organizations alike would benefit from ongoing research-practice partnerships. And expanded South-North collaborations would enhance knowledge exchange related to VYA practice, while providing the resources needed for deeper and broader impact.

WHAT NEXT?

To catalyze VYA girl programming practice and research, project findings suggest five specific action steps that would support the expansion of good practice, evidence creation, learning exchange and the flow of essential resources.

- Provide local grassroots organizations with the financial, material and technical resources necessary to sustain, evaluate and scale their work. Long-term, flexible support is critical.

- Link practitioners within and across regions by creating vibrant communities of practice where organizations from the Global South and

the Global North can share, exchange and troubleshoot together.

- Facilitate research-practice partnerships that enable grassroots organizations to evaluate their programs and strengthen related capacities.

- Develop platforms to share the experiences and expertise of local grassroots organizations, and assist

others in addressing chronic challenges associated with girl-centered programming.

- Act as a catalyst, champion and amplifier of work with VYA girls by encouraging greater investment in this population, raising the profile of innovative programming, and demonstrating the impact of more flexible and sustainable grant-making approaches.

VERY YOUNG ADOLESCENCE: A PIVOTAL TIME FOR GIRLS

Early adolescence is a time of intense change: it comes with hormonal fluctuations, physical changes and emotional upheavals. The beginning of adolescence is also when identities begin to take shape, values are reinforced, and the desire for individuality wrestles with the need to belong. For far too many girls, it is a time when traditional norms are rapidly consolidated, and opportunities are narrowed.

Yet this incredibly challenging time in a girl's life is often overlooked as a critical window, when focused attention can have a lasting, transformational impact. Investing in early adolescence supports younger adolescent girls as they negotiate rapid changes, while also providing girls with the information, skills and support to realize their full potential.

EMpower works globally to empower marginalized youth, especially girls. The organization is currently exploring the state of philanthropic, programmatic and scholarly investment in very young adolescent (VYA) girls, including what is being done to support them during this phase of their lives, and where is the knowledge and expertise in programming. EMpower sees this as a critical cornerstone of more strategic investment and programming tailored to VYA girls and the organizations that support them.

When EMpower began this research, the assumption was that limited learning existed for programming with VYA girls. However, the project team's exploration revealed unforeseen and exciting findings. Momentum in VYA girl programming and research is growing worldwide. Numerous local grassroots organizations are conducting valuable, cutting-edge work with VYA girls. Much of this local work has evolved into flexible, holistic and multi-sectoral programming that is girl-driven and thereby responsive to the dynamic needs of both VYA girls and their communities.

A GIRL'S PERSPECTIVE: *"I had my first menstruation at 10 years and did not know anything. I did not tell my mom. I was very scared. I thought I was sick, and I got very sad. I experienced emotional changes. I was afraid to grow up and I did not want to leave childhood." – Adolescent girl, Mexico*

A BRIEF NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

To conduct this research, EMpower partnered with a small team of independent consultants. The project team conducted extensive literature reviews and program scans; an online survey administered to EMpower grantees; key-informant interviews with global practitioners and researchers active in the field; an in-person workshop with Latin American program practitioners and girl program participants; and participatory activities with both VYA and older adolescent girls.

The literature review—which was conducted from June to September 2018 and refreshed in April 2020—identified 123 peer-reviewed articles and 50 articles classified as grey literature. The program scan identified over 50 programs globally. To learn more about the work that EMpower's grantees are doing with specific populations of VYA girls, the project team also administered an online survey to active EMpower grantees in September 2018. This survey garnered 71 total responses, an overall response rate of 93%.

The above learning was then enriched by 20 key informant interviews with practitioners and researchers active in the field. Out of these interviews, 10 were with EMpower's active grantee partners, six were with program practitioners from other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and four were with established researchers whose work focuses on VYA girls. Qualitative data from this phase of the project was also supplemented with an in-person workshop with Latin American program practitioners and girl program participants in March of 2019. This workshop was held in Mexico City, Mexico, and brought together eight EMpower grantees from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Peru.

In an effort to hear directly from girls, the project team partnered with grassroots programs to conduct participatory research with both VYA and older adolescent girls. "Girl-insight" exercises ran in Ghana, India, South Africa and Vietnam, as well as through participant organizations from the Mexico workshop. Each exercise included between five and eleven 10- to 14-year-old girls, with an average of seven participants per group. Focus-group activities were also conducted with girls in India and Ghana.

For more information on all these data streams and the techniques the project team used to analyze project data, please see the annex.

WHAT THE RESEARCH REVEALED

Local grassroots organizations are doing innovative, targeted work with VYA girls to a much greater degree than previously realized.

The field of programming with and for VYA girls is more advanced than anticipated. Over the past decade, global interest in VYA populations has gained momentum, with large-scale studies like the Global Early Adolescence Study (GEAS) and the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research initiative supplementing existing learning from organizations like *Save the Children, Population Council, Rutgers Netherlands,* and the *Institute for Reproductive Health.*[2] The emerging consensus is that programming is most effective when it engages girls to understand and address their interdependent needs.

New research for this project suggests that local organizations are conducting leading-edge work in this space. These organizations are offering flexible, responsive and girl-centered programs that align with and advance the global evidence base in terms of what they know about how to support, protect and empower girls as

they navigate the pubertal transition. Chronic challenges with participant recruitment, retention and engagement do not plague these programs.

In grassroots organizations, girls join early, stay longer and make meaningful contributions to programming along the way.

Local grassroots organizations are a current benchmark for best practices in VYA programming. These organizations include groups like *The Girls Legacy,* which is fighting patriarchal attitudes in Zimbabwe; *I Am a Girl,* which works to combat gender-based discrimination in Barbados; and *Tiempo de Juego,* which organizes activities to help keep children and youth away from gang-related violence in Colombia. And this innovative and effective work is just the tip of the iceberg.

Spotlighted organization: THE GIRLS LEGACY

The Girls Legacy is a grassroots organization in Zimbabwe that works to eradicate gender-based violence and give girls and young women the knowledge and skills to fulfill their potential. Poverty is a major challenge in Zimbabwe, where traditional and religious norms mean that girls are more affected by harmful practices and economic difficulties. Girls are often pulled out of school and made to marry early to relieve families of the financial burden of supporting them. *The Girls Legacy* runs several programs, including a series of clubs that work with adolescents in and out of school. "Amber" clubs are designed specifically for girls aged 12 to 15. They incorporate age-appropriate programming that grows with girls and helps foster bonds that last into older adolescence. "Letters to my Father" is a publication that gives girls a platform to talk about the gendered experiences and issues that affect their daily lives. *The Girls Legacy* also created Zvipo, a cartoon character that celebrates black girlhood and plays an important role in the organization's outreach activities.

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2.   See selected references at the end of this document for source material relevant to programming with VYA girls.

According to the project's online survey, over 80 percent of EMpower grantee survey respondents are actively programming with VYA girls, with nearly 65 percent using programming approaches and content specific to VYA girls (see figures 1 and 2). These precise statistics apply only to EMpower grantees surveyed in September 2018. But qualitative data gathered from other sources—including interviews with EMpower grantees and other global and grassroots organizations conducting programming and research with VYA girls, as well as consultations during the 2019 Mexico workshop—reinforce this broader finding.

Local grassroots organizations do not need to be convinced of the value and importance of VYA programming. They are already actively engaged in implementing sophisticated, thoughtful and highly-contextualized programming hand-in-hand with girls.

Figure 1. Data from EMpower Grantee Survey
Do you currently conduct programming with girls ages 10-14?

Yes	59
No	12

# of respondents
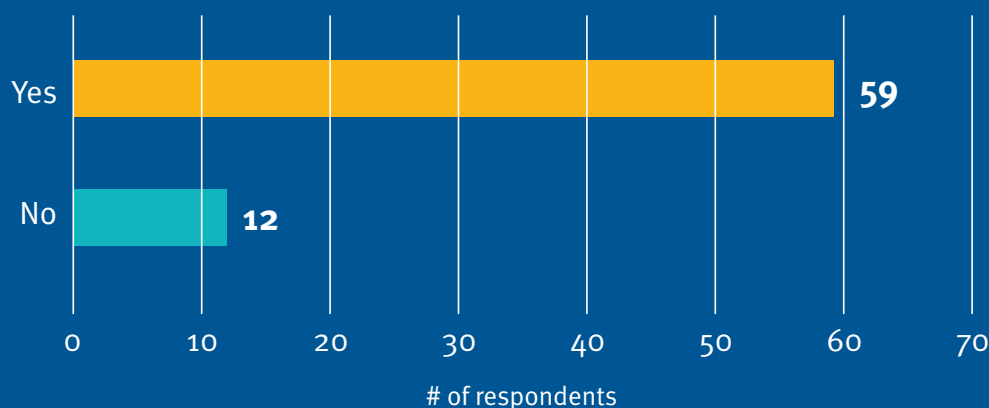
Figure 2. Data from EMpower Grantee Survey
Do you use specific programming approaches and content for girls ages 10-14?

Yes	39
No	19

# of respondents
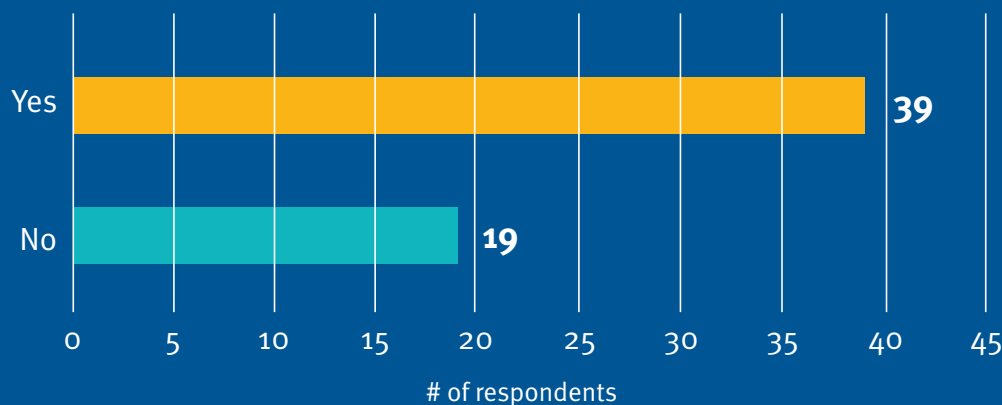
Local grassroots programming has moved younger and become more holistic over time. Many of the programs that the project team investigated have increasingly shifted their programming to reach younger age groups. While the majority of these programs work primarily with girls in schools, in either urban or rural settings, many organizations have an active interest in scaling their work to reach other locations and groups. (See figure 3 for a snapshot of the populations reached by EMpower grantees.)

Figure 3. Data from EMpower Grantee Survey

Which girl populations between the ages of 10-14 do you currently include in your programming? (Multiple responses possible)

Population	# of respondents
Disabled	9
Homeless/street children	3
Residing in Institutions	11
Refugee	5
Migrant	11
Working for income	10
Adolescent/Teenage Mothers (or parents)	15
Married	5
Out of School	17
In School	48
Rural	19
Urban	39

# of respondents
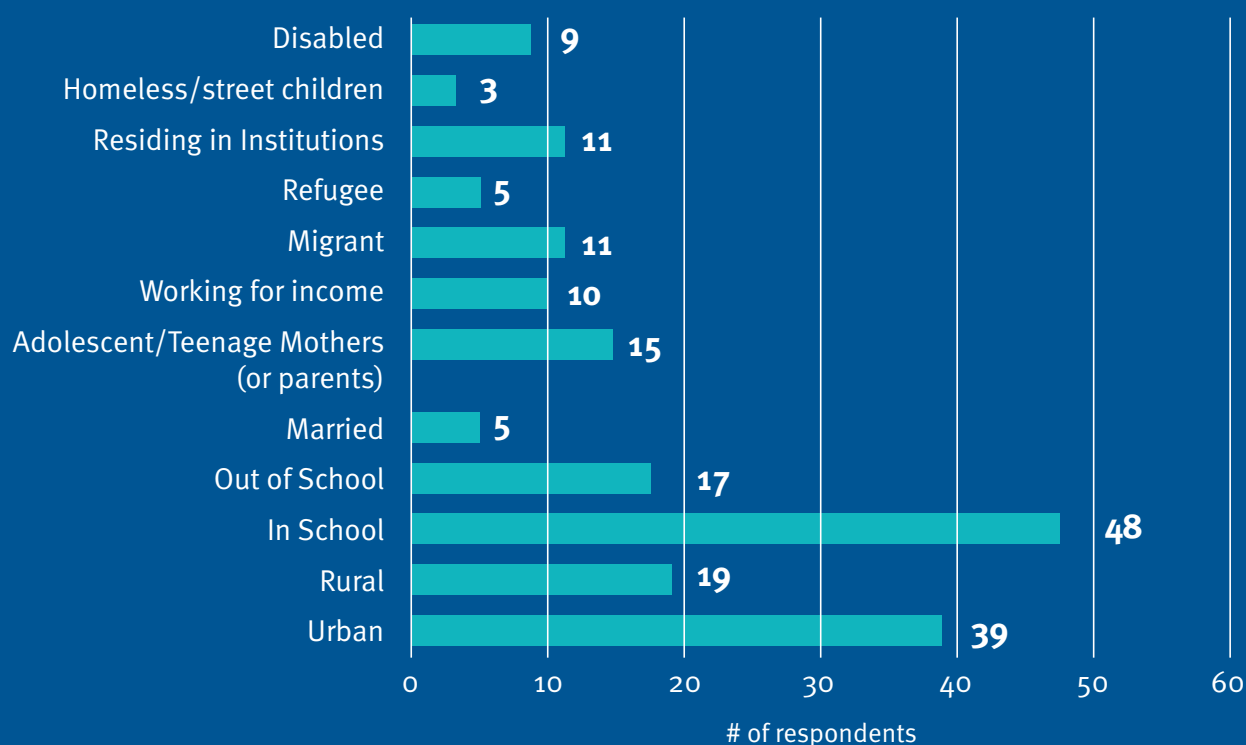
One programmer in Barbados explained that the 10 to 14 age range is crucial because girls need to be given tools before adolescence so that they can "make positive and sound decisions during the puberty transition." A big part of this organization's mission is to make sure girls have essential information to navigate adolescence, in addition to the skills and confidence to speak up. "We are trying to change the social narrative around what is 'pretty', what is 'feminine', and what is acceptable as a girl. We want to put girls on safe, positive paths before they have problems," the programmer said.

A GIRL'S PERSPECTIVE: *"I would have liked more information about the transition to puberty, long before I began to experience changes in my body. Before menstruation begins. We need more information about the changes that are associated with puberty and how they are happening."*
– Adolescent girl, Mexico

Similarly, while many of these organizations began with a specific programmatic focus—such as improving school performance, reducing rates of adolescent pregnancy, or preventing gender-based violence—they have since developed more holistic approaches. Significantly, the majority of programmers interviewed for this report said that the shift towards integrated programming was due to a deepened understanding of what VYA girls actually need. In many cases, the shift was explicitly encouraged by VYA girls themselves. By advocating for a broader range of topics and activities, and encouraging programs to expand their reach, girls have begun to influence the direction that organizations take. Today, many local programs are genuinely girl-centered and girl-driven.

In Mexico, one organization's initial goal was to go into schools and raise awareness about environmental conservation. The organization was doing this with short, one-off workshops. But its focus changed based on input from young people. "As we listened and learned more about the lived realities and expressed needs of young people in our communities, we broadened our focus," an affiliated programmer said.

Spotlighted organization: TIEMPO DE JUEGO

Tiempo de Juego is a grassroots organization in Colombia that works in an area beset by gang activity, violence, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and high school dropout rates. The organization's entry point into the community was soccer clubs that were intended to promote learning through play. *Tiempo de Juego* has grown and professionalized over time. It now offers activities driven by the interests of program participants – including art, cheerleading and dance. The organization also organizes large-scale advocacy events dedicated to violence prevention, such as night marches and community dialogues, and devotes considerable programmatic attention to empowering girls. In so doing, *Tiempo de Juego* employs a near-peer mentoring approach, training older girls to work with VYAs who are between 11 and 16 years old. Some programming, developed in partnership with Women Win, includes girl-focused modules on identity and financial literacy. *Tiempo de Juego* also models gender equity institutionally through its pay scales and the composition of its leadership team. The organization has created a standing "Gender Group" to help facilitate this on an ongoing basis. *Tiempo de Juego* also promotes gender equality among boys and young men as a complement to its work with girls and young women.

Meaningful involvement of VYA girls is essential to success

The organizations that most exemplify best practices are those that meaningfully involve VYA girls. Though there is broad consensus around the value of this approach, true VYA engagement requires significant time, effort and resources. While international NGOs are doing significant work with VYA populations and beginning to involve girls in formative research related to program design, these investments are often more difficult for larger NGOs, which may have short program cycles. Sustained, long-term partnerships with individual girls are more characteristic of grassroots programs.

Local grassroots organizations are doing impactful, organic work hand-in-hand with VYA girls—and this is creating more flexible, responsive and girl-centered programs. The project's survey of EMpower grantees reinforced the fact that many local organizations are already involving VYA girls (see figure 4).

One Zimbabwe organization designs programs that keep girls participating throughout adolescence. "The program is set up for girls to move up and learn more sophisticated knowledge and skills as they grow, as well as take on more responsibility in actually delivering the program as coaches, once they graduate from being participants in the program," an affiliated programmer said.

Figure 4. Data from EMpower Grantee Survey
Are girls involved in the creation, development or leadership of your programming?

- **Yes** 67%
- **No** 33%
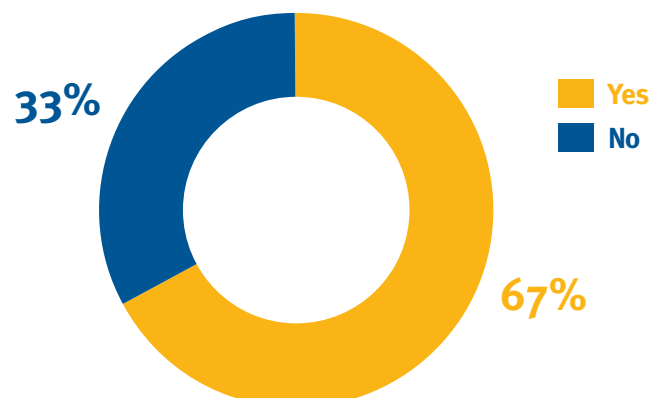
Local organizations often begin with a narrow focus, but their programming continues to evolve based on the perspectives and contributions of VYA girls, as well as their context. In Peru, *Alternativa* encourages the formation of informal girls' collectives. In Indonesia, *Red Nose Foundation* gives peer educators substantial latitude in the direction of programming. In Barbados, *I Am a Girl* offers small seed grants to encourage girl-led entrepreneurship. Other organizations—like *VANGO* in Vietnam, *Feminist Approach to Technology* in India, *The Girls Legacy* in Zimbabwe and *BRAVE* in South Africa—involve girls significantly in both the design and execution of programming.

All of these strategies allow for the creation of truly girl-driven programs and organizations. These organizations incorporate girls into their leadership structures, while giving them real input into all aspects of programming. Often, this involves sustained work with individual girls, as meaningful involvement in program design happens when girls are able to transition to roles of greater programmatic responsibility over time. This, in turn, requires organizations to invest—and reinvest—in developing the skills of their participants as they "age up" into more influential positions within the program. The return on this investment is enormous: involving girls makes for stronger, more effective and more responsive programming.

In one South African organization, girls meet two or three times a week for an afterschool program that is now largely run by the first cohort of girl graduates. "We call them senior girls," a programmer at the organization said. "Our model allows them to come back and become part of the program team to run and expand the program. There is a lot of demand." Many of the girls who graduated from the program now want to start their own programs with younger girls.

A GIRL'S PERSPECTIVE: *"Alumni girls need to be involved in mobilization visits to the community so that parents and community members can see what alumni girls are doing. When they see successful girls, then they will be more supportive of their own daughters. In many ways, alumni girls become role models within the community mobilization." – Adolescent girl, India*

One programmer in India emphasized that, in order to see long-term change, organizations must work closely with girls over a long period. "Most work on girls' rights is short-term," the programmer said. "After these one-off experiences, girls' aspirations are raised, but they are left to fight alone." However, when there is a solid foundation of girl leadership, change happens much faster. "Momentum comes with critical mass, and this comes from long-term systematic support through small organizations that are deeply connected to the communities and the girls. Now the community leaders—graduates of the program—are the engine of the program," she continued.

A highly effective strategy for retaining girls past early adolescence is to embed them in a larger programmatic context that provides advanced content and expanded opportunities. In practice, this might mean introducing mentoring arrangements with others who have gone through similar experiences, encouraging the formation of girls' collectives, or implementing peer-to-peer leadership and pathway programs.

A GIRL'S PERSPECTIVE: *"In 2015, my pastor told me and other girls in church about an [organization] retreat and I went for the sake of going. I thought it would be religious. In that weekend, I was able to express more than I ever had. I found a safe and supportive environment that encouraged me to share my thoughts and experiences as a teenage girl. I could be open and honest, and I felt authentic acceptance. As I have grown with [the organization], I see that it gives me a platform to share my ideas and see those things become real. I started as a mentee. Then I became a peer leader, and then a junior counselor at our summer camp. That position gave me more authority. It was very challenging to go from being a participant to being in charge. This opportunity forced me to mature and take on a different role—and it was not easy! And then I became a program intern. This has allowed me to see how hard it is to do good programming with girls. It seems so simple when you receive it, but now I see how much work it takes to develop and deliver programming that works with different girls. I want to stay as long as I can—as long as I am useful. I am always learning new things here and constantly see that there are so many ways to do things. In four years, I have been able to learn and do so many things."* – Adolescent girl, Barbados

Spotlighted organization: BRAVE

BRAVE was inspired by a group of ten-year-old girls in South Africa who wanted to make their school and gang-ridden community safer. The organization works to combat violence and promote girls' empowerment. It runs workshops, holiday camps and weekend programs, in addition to a leadership camp for girls who are transitioning from middle school to high school. *BRAVE* (which used to be called Rock Girls) works to foster a sense of "permanent belonging" among its participants. Its slogan "once a Rock Girl, always a Rock Girl" speaks to the organization's commitment to creating this permanent sense of belonging. There are many ways for girls to stay engaged after completing the early stages of the program, and older girls are given increasing responsibility for program design and implementation.

An organization in Vietnam has had similar success integrating young people into its core team. After participants finish one phase and enter the next age group, they can assume more responsibilities. "We try to move them into elevated roles, into more things to do, and they are also trained more," an affiliated programmer said. "We let them work together with us, learn the [ins and outs]. And then, when they are older, we go back to training them. We start saying: here's the concept, the strategy, the reason behind that. And finally, they click. They have the theories behind what we do, and they see the bigger picture."

Truly involving girls requires time, effort, resources—and patience. Several project respondents emphasized the value and necessity of involving girls, while commenting on the difficulty of doing this effectively. Even organizations that routinely conduct formative or exploratory research into the needs of local VYA girls struggle to meaningfully involve these girls over the life-course of their programs. VYA girls may lack the necessary skills or expertise to be fully involved in either program design or evaluation. There are also serious concerns about both tokenistic involvement and the added expense of engaging VYA girls. However, while resources present barriers, local organizations are finding solutions to most of these problems. Girls can undergo relevant training as their capacities develop and they progress through programs. And even prior to this training, girls can begin to shape activities, content and evaluation methods, as they know their own realities best. Forging meaningful partnerships with girls allows programs to evolve with the populations and communities they serve, but this is only possible if adult program practitioners devote time and resources to the effort.

One programmer in the United States spoke of trying to find the right balance when it comes to girls' involvement. "We struggled with this a lot. There's always a lot of pressure. You should have them on your advisory boards. OK, yeah, but they're going to come, and they're not going to understand. They're going to be uncomfortable, and they're going to just be token kids." Instead, what the programmer's home organization tries to do is work with youth groups that already exist. It seeks advice from these groups, and engages them in formative research. "We apply a lot of different kinds of drawing, and written timelines, and mapping so that we can get their perspective on what their needs and concerns are and build programs around that. Then we also do rapid field tests with smaller groups of young people. And ask them, in a formal way, what did you like? What didn't you like? And we move forward that way."

Families and communities need to be engaged, even when this is not easy

Building partnerships with families and communities is essential to reaching VYA girls. The project team's research suggests that engaging with the wider community is often just as important as engaging with families. This is not always easy. But the support of even conservative or traditional communities can be won through intensive outreach efforts that clearly show the positive impacts that individual programs have on girls. Success lies in fostering deep, three-way relationships between girls, their families and communities, and implementing organizations.

As one programmer in Zimbabwe expressed: "There is demand by the families for the information we provide to the girls, and they are more supportive when they are engaged directly." Her organization runs monthly dialogue sessions that bring together girls, parents, community leaders and other stakeholders to discuss topics from an anonymous question box. The organization also targets areas with high rates of violence, child marriage and other issues that disproportionately affect girls. "We often bring in experts to address these issues at the community level, and illustrate how they are negatively impacting girls," the programmer explained. "We then engage parents and stakeholders in co-generation of solutions. We also meet one-on-one with parents and families when issues arise."
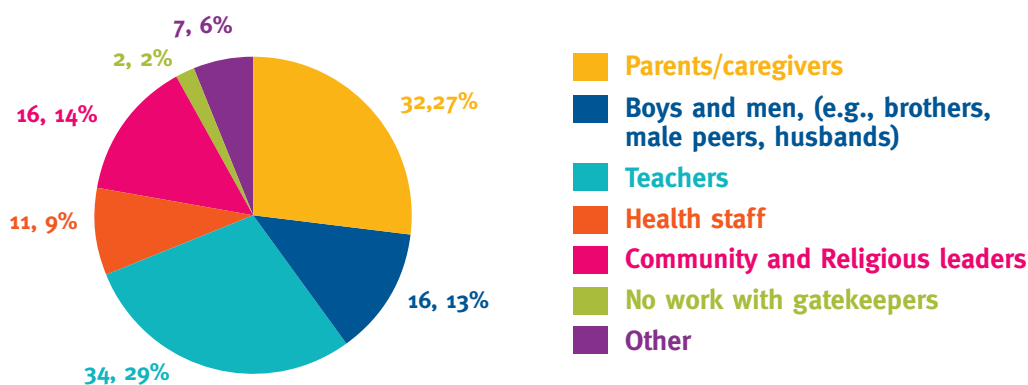
The most effective recruitment and retention strategies engage both families and duty bearers

within the community. Project respondents were unanimous in asserting the importance of engaging with parents and other caregivers as a means of reaching girls. This is considered especially important when working with the VYA population. Failing to get the consent and buy-in of guardians for program participation often results in substantial backlash from both families and communities. Duty bearers—including school or governmental officials, community or religious leaders, and even girl advocates themselves—can also be helpful in identifying and recruiting VYA girls. Broad-based community support is equally essential to helping girls stay with programs for as long as possible.

Assistance from local institutional partners is critically important for larger NGOs, which may otherwise lack the necessary community-level connections and reach to access the most vulnerable girls. Community-based organizations are also best positioned to establish and sustain mutually-beneficial coordination with duty bearers. Because most VYA programs work with girls who are still in school—and are sometimes even run on school premises —collaborations with local educators are often necessary for the successful implementation of programs. The support of local and national officials can also help smaller organizations replicate their work in other districts and regions. Figure 5 offers a snapshot of the substantial work that EMpower grantees are currently doing to engage VYA communities.

Figure 5. Data from EMpower Grantee Survey
Do you work with the gatekeepers of girls ages 10-14? (Multiple responses possible)

- 32,27% Parents/caregivers
- 16, 13% Boys and men, (e.g., brothers, male peers, husbands)
- 34, 29% Teachers
- 11, 9% Health staff
- 16, 14% Community and Religious leaders
- 2, 2% No work with gatekeepers
- 7, 6% Other

The most common approach to forging partnerships with families and communities is to target both at the same time. This can be done through street plays, family fun days, health fairs or presentations at school meetings. Organizations engaged in this research have developed explicit programming designed to reach parents and community members, often integrating individual home visits to establish trusting relationships and troubleshoot lapses in program attendance. Sometimes, this even has a community-level effect, with interested parents becoming advocates for the program. *SiKanda*, in Mexico, brings together girls, mothers and grandmothers to form intergenerational child protection teams. In other organizations, engaged parents become the driving force behind signature campaigns or other advocacy events.

Spotlighted organization: FEMINIST APPROACH TO TECHNOLOGY (FAT)

Feminist Approach to Technology, in India, was set up in 2007 to promote the inclusion of women in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) professions. The organization engages regularly with families, often going door-to-door to provide information about its programs. When girls enroll in these programs, they do so with their parents or guardians. *FAT* also conducts weekly community visits to see the families of girls who were absent from programming the previous week. The purpose of these visits is to identify the factors that limit girls' participation and, in so doing, bring girls back into the program. The *FAT* team also works intensively with families in several other ways, including through monthly dialogues that are specifically designed to improve communication with parents and guardians.

One programmer from NORSAAC in Ghana said that before any intervention begins, her organization first connects with parents, traditional leaders and other community gatekeepers to share information and establish buy-in. "Once the traditional stakeholders understand the project or engagement concepts," the programmer said, "it becomes conducive for interested girls to buy into the project and voluntarily participate in activities . . . [This] creates the enabling environment for pupils to voluntarily participate in engagements."

Still another strategy is to map the needs of families and communities, and then work to meet these needs through organizational activities. *PROMSEX*, in Peru, combines family events with the provision of useful services, including registration for national ID cards. The best approach is context dependent, but the goal of these outreach efforts is always the same: strong and supportive relationships between girls, their families and communities, and implementing organizations.

Spotlighted organization: Vietnamese American Non-Governmental Organization Network (VANGO)

VANGO's mission is to strengthen humanitarian and development work in Vietnam. The organization was a founding partner in the Health Initiative through Peer Education (HIPE) program, which addresses health and social issues in disadvantaged communities through youth empowerment and community engagement. HIPE trains at-risk, school-aged youth to become peer health educators, who not only run school-based trainings, but also take an expansive view of their role in the community, to the point that they have independently mobilized to create safe spaces for young people. The program is often such a meaningful part of its participants' lives that families become known as "HIPE families."

Part of this is the visible impact that HIPE has on VYAs, but part of it is also VANGO's work to meet family-level needs. The organization engages in significant community mapping—of both needs and resources—and then mobilizes its network to meet identified needs, while leveraging and building on available resources.

Many organizations still struggle with engaging fathers and non-traditional caregivers. Home visits and community outreach events are often effective ways to mobilize mothers, but fathers and non-traditional caregivers are more difficult to reach and bring on board. Most informants interviewed for this project emphasized the value of "meeting fathers where they are"—even if that means going to tea stalls or sports bars—as fathers are less likely to attend events organized by either schools or community organizations. Part of this is due to difficult work or commuting schedules, but part of it can be attributed to the fact that fathers in traditional environments often feel that engaging with VYA programming is a wife's responsibility. Some organizations have tried to combat this mindset by holding informal or unscheduled events in places where fathers are likely to be, as these events tend to draw more interest and curiosity.

One programmer from the United States noted that convincing male caregivers to become involved in activities is a huge challenge. Her organization has tried many different approaches to engaging male caregivers, especially those who are out working all day. "We've tried different schedules—so different days of the week, different times of the day… but we just can't beat soccer games and drinking." One thing that seems to work is surprise—showing up to where the father is without prior announcement. "Because when you plan ahead of time, and you let people know that, hey, there's going to be a session on this at this time and this place, fathers will write it off. And say, oh, you know, my wife will attend that. Or it's not my responsibility. But when you just show up in a place and say, 'hey, we're doing this activity', people are curious. And they come. That was surprising for us and a little counter-intuitive."

Often, the support of conservative and traditional communities can be gained through a combination of intensive outreach efforts and demonstrably positive impacts on VYA girls. Many respondents commented on the backlash their organizations experience in conservative or traditional environments. But they also spoke hopefully about building trust and making

meaningful connections with these communities. Their organizations have learned how to appeal to the most resistant families by emphasizing strategic buy-in points, like menstrual education and bodily integrity—issues that matter to caregivers but that they do not necessarily know how to discuss.

One programmer in India spoke of the need for tact and sensitivity when approaching families. "What you have to do," the programmer said, "is just see what will be the buy-in point for them."

While her organization was piloting its early adolescence curriculum, it hosted sessions with the parents of 9- to 13- year-old girls. During one of these sessions, program staff learned that menstrual education and hygiene were actually very important to parents. Parents were also interested in girls understanding more about both their bodies and the consent process. "And since that's one of the major competencies of both the [comprehensive sexuality education] curriculums that we have, that's generally our pitch to the parents," the programmer continued.

A GIRL'S PERSPECTIVE: *"Teachers avoid topics related to the transition to puberty, sexuality, reproduction and gender. Although they are included in textbooks, they often ask us to move on to the next chapter. But in certain cases, some teachers have helped us—and that makes a difference."* – Adolescent girl, Mexico

A programmer in South Africa also spoke of the immense possibilities of engaging with parents. "Most families are very bought in. We do family outreach and family events, like family photo day, where we take a portrait of the girls with their families and give it to them." The organization holds regular family and community events where girls share and demonstrate what they have learned. Parents are also very involved: they have their own WhatsApp group, they support road trips, and act as champions. "They use WhatsApp

as a tool for community policing, with safety updates to keep girls safe," the programmer explained. "But some mindsets are difficult to change. We had a girl with an unwanted pregnancy after she completed high school, and her mother put a lot of pressure on her to keep the child, despite it being the farthest thing from the girl's plans and desires for herself. We clearly have a lot more to do to shift these entrenched social norms."

A GIRL'S PERSPECTIVE: *"Organizations should speak to parents, so that the parents can understand what the program is, and then agree to send their children. If organizations speak to the parents at the beginning—chart the full journey and expectations of the program and share the full curriculum—then dropout will be likely much less."* – Adolescent girl, India

Programming should be dynamic, and evolve in response to the changing needs and interests of girls

What does impactful programming for VYA girls look like? While there are some core content areas, the most effective approach is to respond flexibly to the specific interests and needs of VYA girls. These interests and needs will vary with the circumstances of individual communities of girls and, in some contexts, achieving responsive programming may mean differentiating programming by age or gender. The one true essential is offering dynamic programming that evolves in response to input.

In Zimbabwe, one organization described how it integrates the changing needs of girls into program practice. "Our manual provides a framework," an affiliated programmer said. "But it is always adapted by each community and club.

Our manual is living, evolving and dynamic. Each year we get feedback from coaches to develop new tools for them. We are developing a toolkit. The manual is core, but we will add reporting and advocacy tools to each module . . . By mid-year we will have a revised "Girls by Girls" toolkit. We are constantly learning and adapting based on girls."

The majority of project informants agree that there are some core content areas that should be included in all programming for VYA girls. These include puberty and pubertal changes, menarche and menstrual hygiene, bodily integrity and consent. (See figure 6 for the range of content areas currently covered by EMpower grantees.) Most organizations also take a rights-based approach, and work within a broader girls' empowerment framework.

Figure 6. Data from EMpower Grantee Survey
What is the focus of your programming with girls aged 10-14?
Please number the following thematic areas in order of priority, with "1" being the highest priority.

	1	2	3	4	N/A
Education	21	9	5	7	2
Girl's Empowerment	12	17	10	2	2
Violence Prevention	8	6	6	11	11
Health Education, Promotion and Services	4	10	16	8	6
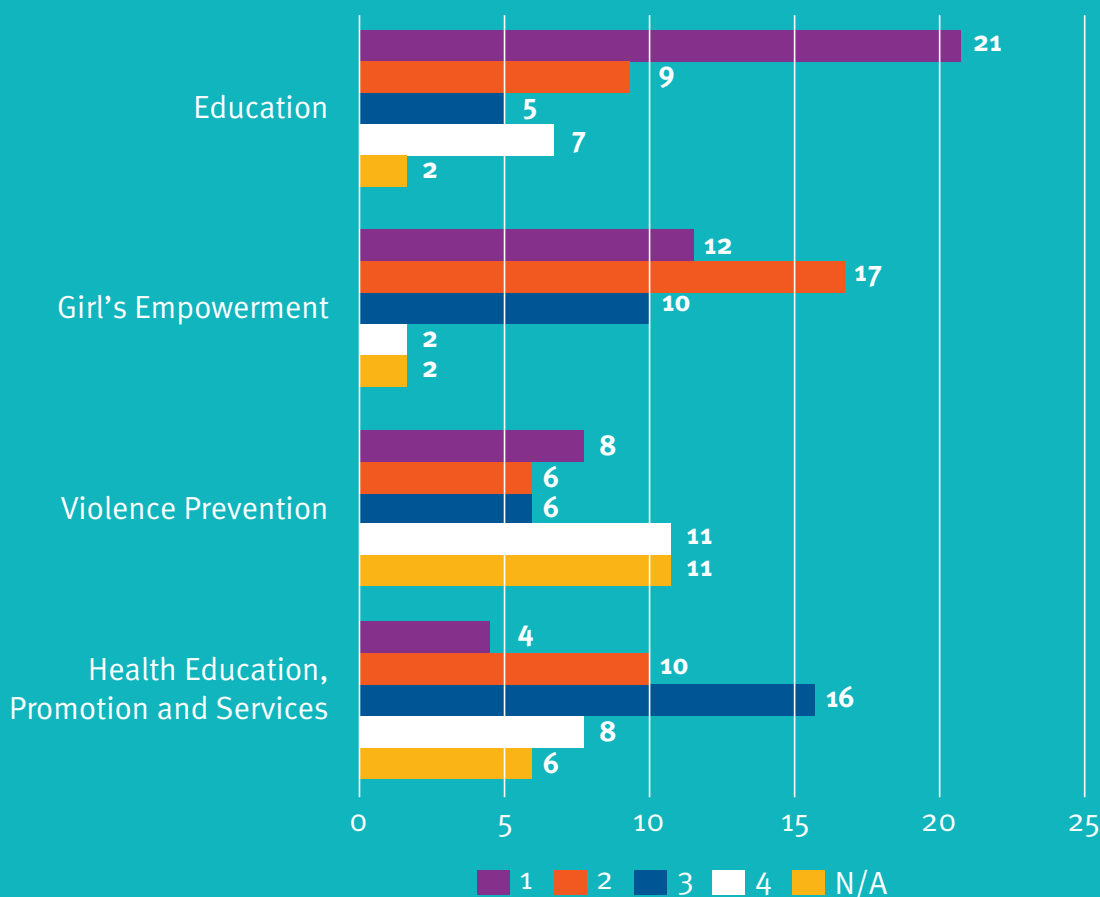
In general, however, the most effective approach to programming is to adapt to the changing needs, interests and capacities of VYA girls. This means taking a local and girl-centered approach. **Girls should be able to take the lead and renegotiate programming as their circumstances change.** Pedagogical and curricular tools—whether designed internally or adapted from external sources—should be dynamic, fun and accessible to this age group.

Several of the project's spotlighted organizations are already doing this. *BRAVE* in South Africa hosts demand-driven soccer clubs; *The Girls Legacy* in Zimbabwe runs coach-directed clubs that base their activities on the needs and preferences of participants; and *I Am a Girl* in Barbados reworks its programming on an annual basis in response to input from girls. Other organizations use film, cartoon characters and social media to reach girls where they are. The common denominator is flexible, girl-centered and girl-influenced programming that is responsive to local needs.

One programmer in Barbados spoke of the importance of flexibility in implementing programs: "We do have a manual, but we are not limited by it. There is flexibility in how it is used. We encourage facilitators to use our prompts to create different activities. It's not structured. And we ask girls to share opinions about what they are interested in. Girls are always involved in programmatic decision-making."

Very few VYA programs currently offer age-differentiated content, although the need for this is clear. Many organizations have only recently begun to adapt their programming to younger participants by designing specific content and approaches for use with VYAs. The programs offered by these organizations are therefore still in flux. As such, while several of our respondents spoke of the need to further differentiate programming by age—by using different curricula and tools for 10- to 12-year-old girls, for example—very few organizations are actually doing this. Sometimes this is intentional, as with the Girls' Puberty Book Projects—which are affiliated with Columbia University, and disseminate locally-designed, locally-sourced puberty books to girls in Tanzania, Ghana, Ethiopia and Cambodia. These books explicitly target the entire VYA age range because of individual differences in the timing of menarche. But for other programs, the cognitive, emotional and developmental differences among VYA girls can have a substantial effect on the success of programming.

Girls at the higher end of this age range are often significantly easier to access, but younger girls need support too. Many of the project's girl respondents, aged 14 and 15 at the time of their participation, said they wished they had access to information about puberty earlier. Younger girls also have valuable contributions to make to both programming and research. These contributions are significantly more difficult to access without age-differentiated strategies.

A GIRL'S PERSPECTIVE: *"Sports are a great way to teach girls about their bodies. Engaging in sports to speak about gender-based violence creates a space where girls are confident and aren't afraid to speak out about their bodies." – Adolescent girl, India*

There is no doubt that the VYA age range is a time of rapid changes. "A 10-year-old is nothing like a 14-year-old in their knowledge, their attitudes, the norms, the way they're expected to behave, the way their bodies are changing and their relationships. Even their ability to sit still, their cognitive ability," one researcher told the project team, adding that it was not uncommon to hear organizations say they had good results with older VYAs but more difficulty engaging the younger ones. "I think it's time that people recognized that we can't just bundle them all together."

There is high demand for some form of gender-synchronized programming–although approaches to this vary widely, and some organizations remain firmly committed to a girl-only approach. Many organizations are responding to the need to engage male allies— or expand programming to reach VYA boys—by offering either co-ed or gender-synchronized programming. Gender-synchronized programming reaches both boys and girls, while providing separate spaces for each. However, there is little consensus on the most effective way to do this and, in practice, organizations employ a variety of different approaches. Most programming exists on a spectrum from completely co-ed to girl-only.

Mobilizing male allies is clearly an essential part of transforming gender norms, but it can be difficult to include VYA boys in programming without losing the focus on girls or drowning out girl voices. Boys generally want to be included, but organizations differ in their responses to this. Many provide co-ed programming or explicitly involve boys in their advocacy efforts. Others see the need for parallel, boy-only programming to supplement their girl-only approach (but do not want to spearhead these programs themselves, for fear of diluting the focus on girls).

Furthermore, while organizations agree about the need to involve boys, they are often divided on the likelihood of success. Many programmers find it difficult to engage boys on issues of gender equality, either because boys do not like the implication that they are "oppressors" or because they are reluctant to give up their entrenched privileges. Other organizations feel strongly that successfully enlisting boys, and having them defend their sisters or help with household chores, is one of the most effective parts of the gender-transformative approach.

There is very little research on which to draw. A clear majority of project informants agree that some form of gender-synchronization is desirable when programming with VYAs. But when it comes down to specifics—how to meet the needs of both populations, while also addressing gender equality—there is little consensus. The situation is further complicated by the perspectives of girls themselves, who often take radically different positions, with some advocating for greater inclusivity, and some unwilling or unable to participate in co-ed programming. To this end, *always* including "girl-only" space and time in programs for VYA girls, while also offering occasional sessions where boys and girls can learn together is recommended.

THE VIEW FROM GIRLS ON INCLUDING BOYS:

"Co-ed sessions are very important so that boys can recognize and appreciate the issues girls face. If boys are trained alone and girls are trained alone, this will never happen." – Adolescent girl, India

"I think it would be better if [these discussions] were separate. Because there are some things that girls may not like to discuss when boys are there. Some people don't feel free to speak when their male counterparts are around. I think that if these things are to be discussed, they should be discussed only among girls."
– Adolescent girl, Ghana

"Boys are not punished, but girls are. This should be addressed at the beginning with both boys and girls. Boys need to understand the consequence of their actions upon the lives of girls, such as being pulled out of school, being beaten, and their honor being called into question." – Adolescent girl, India

"If it's about menstruation, it should be done together because there are some boys that may be having younger sisters or something like that, and then they can help … In my class, for instance, we are 51. We are having only four girls. Because it is a great class. And once, in class, I sat down and when I got up my jeans got spoilt. It was a boy who saw it and told me I should go and change. He helped me, and I used my bag to cover it and went and changed. So, if they know, boys can be really helpful."
– Adolescent girl, Ghana

Intentional measures to safeguard girls are critical to program success

Successful programs ensure the safety and security of the girls in their care, and organizations must also employ ethical standards when conducting programmatic research.

Most organizations have clearly-defined child protection policies and practices in place. This is considered crucial to safeguarding VYA girls. Often, programs also take additional steps, including screening for violence that girls might be experiencing outside of the program; responding on a case-by-case basis with referrals and support; offering explicit risk-reduction and safety-planning sessions; zealously guarding VYA confidentiality; establishing relevant partnerships with families, schools, police and local justice systems; and offering appropriate supervision for VYAs who are traveling.

A growing number of smaller organizations are taking a gendered approach to safety and security. For example, *BRAVE* does not work with male coaches. *The Girls Legacy* works with neither male coaches nor male drivers and screens all personnel through the Ministry of Social Welfare.

Girl-friendly reporting mechanisms and referral pathways are also important elements of safeguarding VYA girls. Service referral and counseling are often built into programs that work with the victims of sexual violence or child abuse. Sometimes, however, these programs find it more effective to communicate informally with families or schools to resolve abuse.

Obtaining the informed consent of parents or guardians, and the informed assent of girls, is critical when working with VYA populations. Organizations are sometimes tempted to overlook the former when working with older adolescents, who do not necessarily require their parents' approval to participate in programming. But failing to obtain the necessary consents when working with VYAs can result in substantial backlash from both families and communities.

Many programs begin this process by holding information sessions in schools.

One programmer in India spoke to this issue of parental consent: "Older girls, they come without telling their parents. They take risks to come and tell their parents later. But younger ones can't do that. We need to get parents' permission for minors to participate." The programmer then added that, for girls, even getting to the program location can be risky, as kidnapping is common among this age group. "There is an important fear factor related to girls moving alone in Delhi," she said.

The consent process must be even more extensive when organizations are planning to conduct any form of research, but there are clear payoffs to participatory research with VYAs. The researchers with whom the project team spoke said that, in some cases, parental consents for program participation might be enough to cover VYA involvement in basic program evaluations or girl-inclusive learning. However, they all agreed on the need to obtain separate consents and assents for any substantive research.

Depending on the context, the organizations involved, and the type of research being conducted, formal approval by an ethics committee may also be required. That said, some researchers feel that obtaining these permissions may be easier than one might think, especially if the purpose of the study is adequately explained to parents and guardians. But neither should researchers become complacent: the process of truly informing both girls and their families is intensive and should ideally be continuous.

"Research consent is really a process," one researcher explained. "Consent is not one thing that you do in the beginning . . . it's a continuous process of negotiation."

Complex as the process may be, however, there are also clear benefits to involving girls in participatory research. A researcher who routinely conducts this type of research emphasized the value of treating VYAs as co-researchers. "They are generating a lot of data through their own activities," she said. "And then the way that we include them in the interpretation of that data is to always go back . . . to discuss this with them. Which I think is right. If they have been participating and putting in a huge effort to fill in those questionnaires, we share . . . the key results with them. And then we also ask for more information. So, we found this. What do you think about that? Do you recognize it? We don't know how to explain this—can you help us with that? So, that way, you get a lot more. And it's a very youth-friendly way of getting their input, perspectives, ideas and information. They love doing that. They love being experts."

Strong links between grassroots and global VYA efforts would help propel the field of VYA girl programming and research forward

The innovative work taking place at local levels is rarely circulated, let alone published. There is a wealth of learning to be derived from grassroots organizations, and this pioneering work deserves recognition from peers in both the Global South and the Global North.

What the project team heard is that a significant challenge in VYA programming is the difficulty of scaling programs and diffusing impact, while remaining responsive to local needs and true to grassroots models. Partly, this is contingent on funding. But it also reflects the dilemma at the heart of truly local programming. If the strength of the program lies in its ties to the community, and its responsiveness to the needs of specific populations, how can that program be effectively scaled? Should we even want it to be?

For one Barbados programmer, the greatest indicator of her organization's success is growing demand for its program, with more girls interested in signing up at every new cycle. To respond to this demand, the programmer is trying to build her leadership team and expand human resources. "But as we grow, we don't want to lose the intimacy of group," the programmer said. "We are activating girls who have grown up through the program and can take on leadership roles. The girl graduates can run the program. Girls learn and grow as they go—they stay open to learning. Adaptability, flexibility—these are qualities we seek in our leadership. We are using the 'reach one, teach one' approach at all levels and this helps us cultivate and multiply our leadership capacity."

As this example suggests, one solution may be to introduce pathway programs and peer-to-peer leadership processes, with girl graduates taking the lead in sustaining and scaling organizational impacts. But the efficacy of this approach has not been definitively established—partly because smaller, local organizations lack the expertise and capacity necessary to undertake in-depth implementation research.

Large NGOs are investing in rigorous implementation research, but even the most committed grassroots organizations lack the expertise and resources needed to effectively analyze raw data from their own programs. The most rigorous research evaluates multi-level, multi-component programs run by larger, global organizations. Most of these efforts involve both qualitative and quantitative research. *Population Council* is relatively unique in its emphasis on randomized-controlled trials; *Save the Children, Rutgers Netherlands,* and the *Institute of Reproductive Health* are all doing innovative participatory research with VYAs. This type of implementation research is now being meaningfully supplemented by large-scale global studies like the GEAS and the GAGE research initiative. All of this work is contributing substantially to our understanding of VYAs. Again, the emerging consensus is that programs are most effective when they address the whole ecosystem of VYA needs. Local grassroots organizations epitomize this approach, but often have difficulty demonstrating their impact, as they frequently lack the expertise and resources necessary to effectively analyze raw data from their own programs.

Spotlighted organization:
INSTITUTE OF REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

The Institute of Reproductive Health at Georgetown University was originally founded to research fertility awareness. Over time, the Institute has become more invested in evaluation research on programs designed to teach VYAs about pubertal changes and gender norms. The methodologies involved in this work are diverse and participatory, and include ethnographic and life-history research, significant-other and best-friend interviews, visual and non-verbal approaches and the use of play. These techniques are notable for the degree to which they involve VYAs in research.

Grassroots organizations like *The Girls Legacy*, *I Am a Girl*, *FAT*, NORSAAC, *VANGO* and *Tiempo de Juego* are currently gathering a substantial amount of qualitative and quantitative data, including information about program participants before and after interventions. Many of these programs have been collecting data on VYA girls for a long period of time, meaning that they now have a rich trove of program learning and, in some cases, longitudinal data. This is a particularly valuable resource that larger NGOs have difficulty developing, for the same reasons that they struggle to sustain long-term connections with individual girls.

Some grassroots programs are even pioneering innovative, new systems of girl follow-up, including girl diaries and scorecards. But when asked to describe their impact, these organizations often rely on anecdotal stories. For example, *BRAVE* sees changes in the demeanor of girls based on length of time spent in the program but cannot express these impacts in more formalized ways.

A programmer in Zimbabwe spoke of the diaries girls use to record their progress in the program. Every year, the girls get new diaries. "We ask them to bring them all each year, and this allows girls to look back at themselves over time," the programmer said. "We reward those who have made progress and can show evidence of their change. Girls keep their diaries and scorecards like credit cards!" Despite this innovative form of girl follow-up, the organization has struggled financially over the last few years because it needs to demonstrate results in order to raise additional funds.

An organization in Mexico has similar problems. An affiliated programmer spoke of the important qualitative changes in girls that this organization has witnessed over time. "What we need is more comprehensive systems and the capacity to demonstrate our impact," she said. "We see girls are forming and running a network among themselves. They are organizing, mobilizing and acting collectively . . . We just need better systems and clear indicators to demonstrate our impact to funders."

This is a problem of capacity, not commitment. All of these organizations express a desire to strengthen their monitoring and evaluation systems, and to demonstrate their impact at different levels over time. Local grassroots efforts could benefit substantially from established research-practice partnerships. These partnerships would deepen the VYA evidence base, extend access to valuable data sources and enhance local research capacity. Funders could also strengthen the internal monitoring and evaluation practices of grassroots organizations—and foster effective partnerships between these organizations and the broader research community—by committing resources to these objectives. Clearly establishing the impact of grassroots programming and its unique, innovative and multi-faceted approaches to girl involvement has the potential to propel the field forward in meaningful ways. This is particularly true if doing so encourages broader South-South and South-North collaborations. Raising the profile of grassroots VYA programming could have ripple effects that spread the impact of this programming from the bottom up.

TO SUM IT ALL UP

We should feel both inspired and hopeful about current and future programming with and for VYA girls. There are already numerous thoughtful, sophisticated and girl-driven programs. Local grassroots organizations are at the vanguard of global best practice in VYA programming—and many have eclipsed the global evidence base in terms of what they know about how to support, protect and empower girls as they navigate the pubertal transition. These organizations are teaching us that girls can and should be meaningfully involved in every aspect of the programming cycle, from design and delivery to evaluation and replication.

There is an untapped reservoir of learning at the grassroots level that can be built upon to inform future VYA practice in both the Global South and the Global North.

Moving forward, the project team recommends:

- Providing local grassroots organizations with the financial, material and technical resources necessary to sustain, evaluate and scale their work. Long-term, flexible support is critical.

- Linking practitioners within and across regions by creating vibrant communities of practice where organizations from the Global South and the Global North can share, exchange and troubleshoot together.

- Exploring research-practice partnerships that enable grassroots organizations to evaluate their own programs and build related capacities.

- Developing platforms to share the experiences and expertise of local grassroots organizations, and assist others in addressing chronic challenges associated with girl-centered programming.

- Acting as a catalyst, champion and amplifier of work with VYA girls by encouraging greater investment in this population, raising the profile of innovative programming, and demonstrating the impact of more flexible and sustainable grant-making approaches.

ANNEX — METHODOLOGY

Work on the VYA Girls Project included extensive literature reviews and program scans; an online survey administered to EMpower grantees; key-informant interviews with practitioners and researchers active in the field; an in-person workshop with Latin American program practitioners and girl program participants; and "girl-insight" and focus-group activities that allowed the project team to hear directly from girls.

Literature review. As part of its investigation into the state of programming for VYA girls, the project team conducted an extensive literature review from June to September of 2018. This review involved targeted searches of academic databases including JSTOR and ProQuest, as well as similar searches through practitioner-focused databases like the Knowledge for Health (K4Health) Project. These searches identified 123 peer-reviewed articles and 50 articles classified as grey literature. The peer-reviewed literature in this area includes large-scale surveys of available programming and implementation research; assessments of multi-level, multi-component programs; in-depth analyses of participatory research practices involving VYAs; investigations into the challenges and opportunities associated with the pubertal transition; and evaluations of more specific interventions targeted at safeguarding health, transforming gender norms, preventing violence and improving educational outcomes. The grey literature is even more variable. Some pieces make a compelling case for investing in VYA girls and increasing their representation in programming. Some discuss what VYA girls need in order to be healthy, to succeed in school, to empower themselves, or to avoid being victimized by others. Others cull best practices from evaluations of current programming, focusing specifically on how to involve girls in programming efforts, how

to engage male allies, or other fundamental aspects of girl-centered programming. Not all of this material is specific to VYA girls, as it also relates to VYA boys, older adolescent girls and adolescents more generally. And none of it captures the rich diversity of programming efforts that the team discovered in the later stages of the project.

Program scan. To supplement its deep-dive into the peer-reviewed and grey literatures, the project team also conducted an extensive program scan from June to September of 2018. This scan utilized information gathered from the above desk review and consultations through personal professional networks—and identified over 50 VYA programs globally. These programs span every region and sub-region, with some operating in multiple countries simultaneously, and others remaining more nationally or sub-nationally focused. The program scan also identified over 70 tools and resources, many of which have grown out of program practice. Many of these tools are open-source and could be used to inform subsequent generations of programming.

Online survey of EMpower grantees. To learn more about the work that EMpower's current grantee partners are already doing with specific populations of VYA girls, the project team administered an online survey to active EMpower grantees in September of 2018. This survey, which ran through SurveyMonkey, was scripted in either English or Spanish, depending on the language preference of the grantee organization. The survey garnered 71 total responses, an overall response rate of 93%. Respondents hailed from multiple countries in Latin America, Africa and East/Southeast Asia, as well as from India, Russia and Turkey (see figures 7 and 8, below). Several of these respondents were then added to the team's working list of key informants.

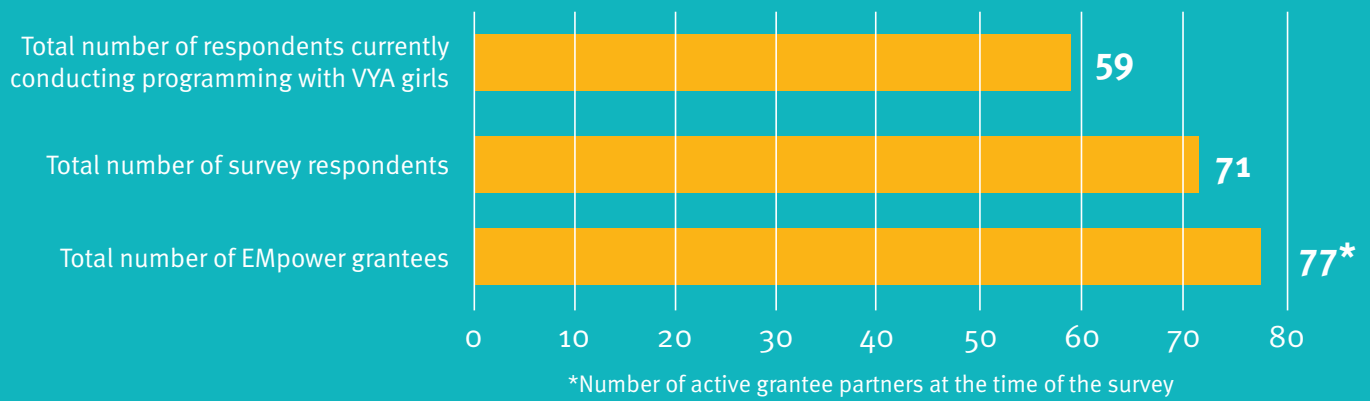## Figure 7. EMpower Grantee Survey: Respondent Information

Total number of respondents currently conducting programming with VYA girls	59
Total number of survey respondents	71
Total number of EMpower grantees	77*

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80

*Number of active grantee partners at the time of the survey

Figure 8. EMpower Grantee Survey: Geographical Breakdown of Identified Respondents

Russia 6%

Turkey 3%

East/Southeast Asia 24%

Latin America 26%

Africa 26%

India 15%
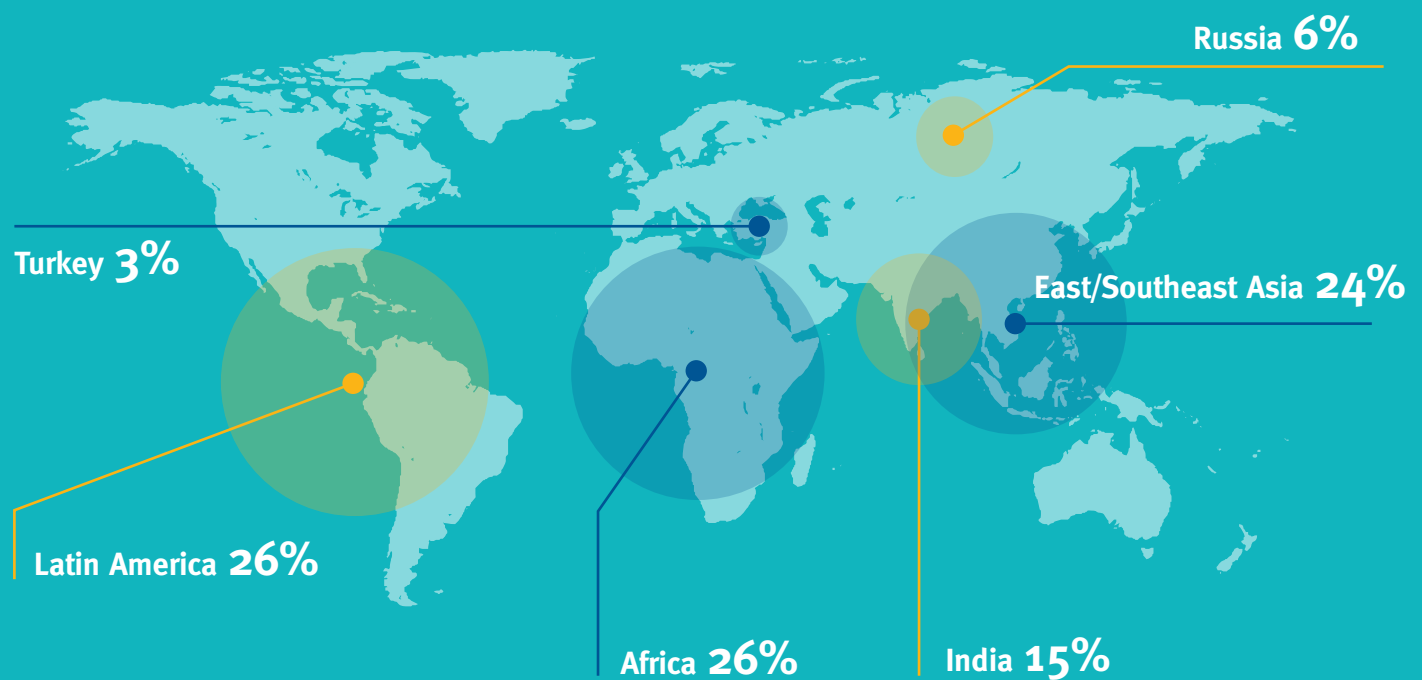
Key-informant interviews with practitioners and researchers. Despite the wide range of published and grey literature related to VYAs—and the glimpses of innovative local programming approaches captured by the EMpower grantee survey—the project team was still left with significant informational holes to fill. Relatively little of the global programming literature is specific to VYA girls, and the grantee survey captured primarily quantitative information. This made gathering and synthesizing relevant qualitative information from key informants who work directly with VYA girls a core element of the project. The team conducted a total of 20 interviews with practitioners and researchers in the field. Out of these interviews, ten were with EMpower's active grantee partners, six were with program practitioners from other NGOs, and four were with established researchers whose work focuses on VYA girls. Distinct discussion guides were developed for use with practitioners and researchers. Interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish, via Skype—and were also recorded for subsequent reference and transcription.

In-person workshop with Latin American program practitioners. To share information from the data streams described above and to inform the next steps of the project, an in-person workshop with Latin American program practitioners and participating girls was conducted in March of 2019. This workshop was held in Mexico City, Mexico, and brought together eight EMpower grantees from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Peru. The workshop provided an in-depth look at the thoughtful and advanced VYA programming being done in a particular geographical region, while also validating the findings from other data sources.

Data from girls. In an effort to gather information directly from girls, the project team also partnered with grassroots programs to conduct twelve "girl-insight" exercises. These exercises ran in Ghana, India, South Africa and Vietnam, as well as through participant organizations from the Mexico workshop. Each exercise included between five and eleven 10- to 14-year-old girls, with an average of seven participants per group. The data from these groups was later supplemented by "Asset Building" exercises with older adolescents in India and Ghana (using materials from the *Population Council*); programming discussions with six older adolescents from EMpower's Girls Advisory Council in India; and focus-group discussions with seven VYAs in India and nine older adolescents in Ghana.

Integrated analysis and synthesis of project findings. The project team analyzed the primary information gathered throughout the project using Dedoose, a collaborative web-based software that facilitates qualitative and mixed-methods data management and analysis. The first step in this analysis was the development of a comprehensive codebook. The creation of 55 codes, organized into 10 thematic categories, facilitated the classification of data into meaningful and relevant themes. Using Dedoose, these codes were then systematically applied to the transcripts from all informant interviews. When the coding process was complete, the data were analyzed thematically, beginning with the code co-occurrences identified by Dedoose. Descriptor data—including quantitative information on relevant key informants, as well as descriptive information on represented organizations—were also systematically mined for relevant parallels with the coded qualitative data.

Limitations. The VYA Girls Project was not designed to be a systematic study of all programming or investment related to VYA girls. The literature reviews and program scans that the project team conducted, while extensive, were not exhaustive—and the practitioners and researchers that the team interviewed as part of the project were not balanced or saturated in terms of informant type, age, gender, identity group or geographic region. The project instead allowed the team to explore central questions among a sample of practitioners and researchers working specifically with 10- to 14-year-old girls. As such, these findings offer a snapshot of the state of the field, rather than clearly generalizable results. However, even this snapshot reveals an expansive universe of programming that has been almost entirely overlooked by the global literature related to VYAs.

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