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Exploring girls' collective action:

evidence mapping on impacts of and resourcing for girls' movements

Working paper

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Table of contents

Figures

Tables

Boxes

Introduction

Young people make up one-quarter of the world's population, and 600 million of them are girls (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2024). Across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), adolescent girls face unique challenges, including limited access to (and retention in) education, a lack of adolescent-responsive healthcare, and risks of violence, including gender and age-based violence, sexual violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). They also have limited economic opportunities that hinder their potential and perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality (Baird et al., 2025). Yet it is now widely recognised that adolescence is a critical window of opportunity during which interventions can transform life trajectories not just for individuals but for their families, communities and nations (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2013; Sheehan et al., 2017; Patton et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2022; Devonald et al., 2023a; Baird et al., 2025).

Although investing in adolescent girls is a critical driver of global development, this demographic remains significantly under-resourced and underfunded. A recent review of official development assistance (ODA) by Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) shows that only 4.7% of total ODA from the top 10 gender equality bilateral donors is targeted to adolescent girls, down from 5.5% the previous year (Neumeister et al., 2024). Expanding investment in adolescent girls must take a holistic approach that includes changing the structural conditions of poverty and inequality, ensuring access to quality healthcare and education, increasing economic prospects for sustainable livelihoods, strengthening robust legal systems that protect human rights, and transforming the social norms that sustain gender inequality.

Within this landscape, there has been a burgeoning interest in the role of girl- and youth-led movements in LMIC contexts and their impact on social and policy change. Some girls' movements are highly organised, while others are more nascent, spontaneous and loosely organised, yet all girls' movements see collective efforts to address issues of inequality, discrimination and injustice that directly affect girls' lives. These movements mobilise members around a shared agenda, using collective action (including service delivery, protests, policy and legal campaigns, programming and advocacy) to pursue long-term social transformation (Nyambura, 2018). Girls' movements are based on a central principle of building girls' power not just as beneficiaries but as leaders and agents of change. By creating their own spaces and networks, these movements help girls build confidence, solidarity, and the skills needed to influence policies and change societal attitudes.

While recognising the criticality of funding systems-level programming and policy change for and with girls in order to sustain at-scale adolescent-responsive education, health and protection systems, it is also important to recognise the value of girl-led organising and girl-led work across communities and nations (UNICEF and Purposeful, 2025). Movements led by girls and young women can play a transformative role in challenging harmful gender norms, advocating for policy change, bringing new issues to public attention, and creating safe spaces for collective action and leadership development (ibid.). Donors, philanthropic and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are increasingly considering amplifying investments in localised girls' movements as an important strategy to contribute to gender equality efforts, but there is currently limited evidence as to how investing directly in girl- and youth-led work can lead to improvements in girls' lives and foster connections to broader gender-equitable development processes. The evidence base on girls' movements and activism is fragmented, nascent, and pays limited attention to the unique position and capacities of adolescent girls in relation to processes of social change and gender justice. A more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics is needed to underpin more effective and inclusive approaches to resourcing girls' movement-building across the social change ecosystem.

This literature review aims to address this gap. Previous research has focused on the funding landscape for girls' activism, community work, and participation in social movements (FRIDA (The Young Feminist Fund) and Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), 2019; Arutyunova et al., 2023; Devonald et al., 2023a and 2023b; Purposeful, 2023), as well as evidence on which types of collective action girls engage in (Guglielmi et al., 2024). Previous evidence indicates that girls contribute in countless ways to social justice, from fundraising to awareness-raising, knocking on politicians' doors, and participating in protests. But there is no clear picture of how effective this collective action is, and how best to resource and partner with girls and their allies to support their work. This review contributes to building this picture by exploring the literature on the impacts of girls' movements in LMIC and crisis contexts to examine how effectively they are resourced, and to identify areas where both evidence and implementation could be strengthened.

Adolescent girls in Oromia, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/ GAGE 2024

Definitions

Girls' and young women's activism and movements

There is a considerable debate in the literature and among funders and practitioners about what constitutes 'girl-led' activism, with no agreed definition (Fried et al., 2019). Many programmes that target girls and girls' lives are top-down interventions led by adults, often donor-driven. Some are more participatory and seek to include girls in planning and/or monitoring processes, with goals to empower girls, so they might be considered 'girl-centred'. The current review aimed to probe **organising for social justice that is truly led by girls and young women, eliciting their roles in activism, social movements, political participation, community actions, and more**. It does not consider girls' involvement in development interventions or programmes except where those are girl-led (for a review of interventions by, with and for girls, see Lewin et al., 2023). Most girls' empowerment programmes were excluded, as these are often designed and delivered by development actors without significant ownership of or direction by girls themselves. As such, we follow the definition offered by Arutyunova et al.: 'Girl-led work is led by girls as individuals or as groups that are founded and led by girls. Girls and their groups often have adult allies and mentors to support them — but the work is unambiguously run by girls' (2023: 26).

This definition includes girl-led organisations, in which girls design projects and make leadership decisions (as defined in Guglielmi et al., 2024), but it also includes much looser collectives such as self-organised groups, and girls' participation in wider social movements, digital activism, and individual activists. We have included girls' movements, youth movements, young feminist movements, and feminist movements in this literature review.

The review includes young people who identify as girls, including trans girls and young women, non-binary, queer, and gender fluid folk. It is hard to quantify how well LGBTQI+ issues are included in the literature on youth movements, except where reports specifically focus on this group of young people. However, a large proportion of the literature reviewed here frames young people's movements as inclusive of multiple gender and sexual identities in contexts where that is politically viable. We include LGBTQI+ rights as a specific sector in which girls' movements are active. As we note in the recommendations, the experiences of these groups within social movements could be given more attention by researchers in the future.

The term 'young feminist' appears to be rising in popularity as a catch-all identity category for people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, including girls, who are engaged in movements for social justice. Not all such movements claim to be feminist, but a large proportion of girls' organising does explicitly draw on feminist principles.

Girls and young women

We did not use a strict age definition for 'girls' or 'young women' but relied on each report's own categorisation. According to United Nations (UN) definitions, 'adolescent' girls include those aged 10 to 19 years old (UNFPA, 2014) and 'youth' includes those aged 15 to 24 years (ibid). The reports reviewed here describe activities by people aged between 10 and 30, but the vast majority focus on those aged 15 to 25. 'Very young adolescents' (VYA) (aged 10 to14) are not well represented in the movements literature, despite constituting an increasingly important target group in empowerment programming through community and school-based girls' and gender clubs and school parliaments, which are providing opportunities for girls to develop self-confidence and leadership skills (Marcus et al., 2017).

Activism

Activism refers to the practice of taking action to effect social, political, economic, or environmental change. Girls' movements can be considered a sub-set of girls' activism, the latter of which does not need to be collective, while the former implies collective action.

Donors and intermediaries

In this report, 'donors' include source funders such as bilateral government funders (providing Official Development Assistance); multilateral agencies like UNICEF and UN Women; and private foundations.

However, girls most often received direct support from funds held by intermediaries like the Global Resilience Fund and the With and For Girls Collective (which are both implemented by Purposeful) who are more likely to have girl- and youth-friendly funding mechanisms) and INGOs (which typically receive funds to implement their own projects, but are increasingly experimental in conducting grant-making to smaller actors), which are also classified in this report as donors.

Social movement

We adopt Gusfield and Jaspers' (2007) definition of social movement to mean a collective, organised, sustained and non-institutional challenge to authorities, power holders, or cultural beliefs and practices.

Resourcing

We take a broad view of what 'resourcing' girls refers to; it includes financial resourcing such as donor funding and non-financial resourcing such as training opportunities, intergenerational partnerships, networking opportunities, donor accompaniment and other types of in-kind support.

Impacts

When reviewing literature on impacts, we looked for sources that analysed what effect girls' movements have had (described in detail in Section 3). We did not include sources that only described outputs of girls' efforts – for example, how many workshops were conducted or how many participants attended those workshops. We instead focused on identifying the changes in attitudes, norms, behaviours, discourse, policies and other results to which girls have contributed. Social movement analysis also recognises the importance of 'biographical' effects of activism on participants: increased self-esteem, confidence, well-being, and self-actualisation (Vestergren, Drury and Chiriac, 2017), which are often highlighted in the girls' movements literature.

Methodology

Our literature review followed an approach known as a review with systematic principles (Marcus et al., 2017). A search was conducted for literature in English, published between 2014 and 2024, examining LMIC contexts, including conflict-affected settings. Table 1 details the keywords that were used to conduct the literature search

We searched academic databases and websites, including Google Scholar, 3ie Development Evidence portal and R4D. We also hand-searched many international NGO databases and funders' websites, including the following: ActionAid; AWID; Count Me In Consortium; Equal Measures 2030; Equality Fund; FRIDA; Girl Effect; Girl Up; Girls First Fund; Global Fund for Women; Global Resilience Fund; IGLYO; MADRE; Malala Fund; Mama Cash; Plan International; Purposeful; Restless Development; Rise Up; Save the Children; She Leads; Womankind Worldwide; Women Deliver; UNICEF; State of the World's Girls series; Global Girlhood series; World Youth Reports series; State of Youth Civil Society series..

Our search additionally relied on expert peer reviewers from girl-centred funders who assisted in providing direction and framing at various intervals of the research process, which further guided our review.

This initial search produced a list of 159 sources that met the criteria on content, which included the following questions:

- What evidence is there on the profile, scope, activities and histories of girls' movements and girls' activism across LMIC and crisis contexts?
- What are the impacts of girls' movements and girls' activism?
- How are girls' movements and activism resourced?
- Does resourcing relate to impact, and if so, how?
- What are the evidence gaps, and what are priorities for future research?
- What are the implementation gaps in terms of the contexts and sectors in which girls' movements are active?

Table 1: Search terms

Resourcing terms	Girls' activism terms	Impact terms
Funding	Girls' movements	Impact
Resourcing	Girl-led	Evaluation
Investing	Girl-led advocacy	Outcome
	Girl-led funding	Result
	Girl-led movement	Effectiveness
	Young	Evaluation
	Youth	Monitoring
	Young feminist	Success
	Adolescent	Policy impact
	Social movement	Norms change impact
	Activism	Legal impact
	Collective	
	Coalition	

These 159 sources were thematically coded and analysed using MAXQDA software to investigate those questions. We coded the literature for whether it described the impacts of girls' movements, including negative impacts. We also coded whether it was evidence-based, meaning that it described a rigorous methodology, and that it was clear where it drew its conclusions from. And we identified different sectors that girls' movements work in, which activities they undertake, and which types of resourcing they have.

Among the sources that described their methodology, we coded each according to whether the evidence was robust, medium, or weak. 'Robust evidence' adhered to rigorous academic standards such as ethical principles, critical examination of the results, transparency of research decisions, and clear methodologies. 'Weak evidence' had unclear methods, or (for example) showed lessons learned, or presented girls' voices and activities as part of an insight or spotlight on a programme without describing a sampling and/or analytical process. 'Medium evidence' encompassed sources in which research methods were visible, but data was not clearly analysed, or (for example) was synthesised but the sources were not described. Some of the 'weak' evidence sources were blog posts, interviews with activists, and funders' annual reports. Although we recognise that these constitute important information on girls' movements and thus need to be considered alongside more academic research, following Lewin et al.'s (2023) recommendation to take a broad understanding of 'evidence', the consideration of weaker evidence sources remained beyond the scope of this literature review. Overall, 69 sources (43%) met the criteria for robust evidence.

Within the 69 'robust evidence' reports, we closely reviewed whether they clearly focused on girls, without subsuming girls into a general category of 'women and girls' or 'youth'. Previous research by GAGE and others suggests that girls' specific needs and capabilities are not always considered in the movement and resourcing literature. For example, research looking at youth movements sometimes lacks a gender analysis or gender-disaggregated data, and research on women's movements can fail to specify whether young women and girls were involved. An example of a paper excluded on this basis is Shier et al. (2014), which examined examples of young people's successful policy influencing in Nicaragua, and identified some pre-conditions and adult support that helped achieve this. It met the criteria for presenting evidence, impact, and types of resourcing, but did not apply a gender analysis or describe if or how girls participated. It is fair to assume that both youth and women's movements may include girls, but the aim of this review was to identify the specific evidence on girls' leadership, participation, and resourcing. Accordingly, some of the 69 robust evidence sources were excluded, leaving 40. It is important to note, however, that robust evidence does not equate to quantitative evidence or impact evaluation (see Section 1), nor does it mean that programmes or activities are working well, just that they are relatively well-researched and have reliable findings.

The final selection of 40 sources provides reliable evidence around either impacts or resourcing in humanitarian[1] and LMIC contexts for girls involved in social justice movements and activism. (For the list of literature reviewed, see Annex 1.)

Limitations

Because of limited investments to explore the impact of girls' movements through implementation research and evaluation studies, the evidence base is thin. It is therefore challenging to track the impacts of girls' movements and to classify their efficacy, sustainability, relevance and efficiency with academic integrity.

Another significant challenge is that formalised organisations and movements receive most research attention, whereas there is a dearth of literature on looser collectives. As girls do not always work within registered NGOs or community-based organisations (CBOs) or formalised movements, their work can be difficult to document, monitor and evaluate. Many girls' collectives are not formally organised and remain unregistered (Plan International, 2023), often because of the cost and administrative burden of registering as a CBO or NGO (FRIDA and AWID, 2019), or as a deliberate choice to sidestep bureaucratic requirements and responsibilities

1 Although the search for this review intentionally included the humanitarian sector, only two sources were included in the final review. Girls' activities in humanitarian contexts are not often conceptualised as part of a movement, and crisis contexts by their nature can make it challenging to produce strong evidence. The wider literature shows that girls are working in crisis contexts, often delivering services and through support groups. After streamlining the selection to a clear focus on girls, movements, and robust evidence, we retained only Jones, Pincock and Yadete (2024) on the Qeerroo anti-regime protest movement in Ethiopia, and Modungwa et al. (2021) on developing Purposeful's Global Resilience Fund for girls during Covid-19.

(Salazar Rodriguez, 2018). Some of the more radical groups do not want to be associated with big funders due to their politics (O'Malley and Johnson, 2018), while others prefer to operate 'under the radar' due to the specific sensitivities of their work, which may misalign with formal government policy (Guglielmi et al., 2024). Girls' activities that are unfunded and informal are unlikely to have published documentation about their work (Chen, 2019).

Linked to this, and as argued by Guglielmi et al. (2024), adolescent girls and young people continue to remain marginalised from accessing funding for their work (activities by girls and young people with disabilities are the most underfunded). Therefore, the evidence base leans towards examining girls' activities that are conducted through registered organisations, NGOs or CBOs, with some level of formality such as regular meetings, financial accounting, or a governance structure. Donors are also drawn to support these kinds of organisations because it is easier to show donor impact, rather than (for example) supporting girls' collective direct action, their individual paths through politics, or small-scale community work.

Of further note, and as also discussed in Guglielmi et al. (2024), there is limited literature that profiles the individual characteristics of girls and young women involved in leading girl- and youth-led movements. A recent report found that approximately 65% of girl and young women activists lived in urban areas, approximately 1 in 10 identified as internally displaced, and 62% had completed higher education (Diaconu and Fergus, 2023). As these figures are indicative of girls and young women who are predominantly urban and well-educated, they are also more likely to be exposed to opportunities for organising that attract donor funding and thus more likely to appear in the literature as examples of success. These demographic characteristics mean that the published literature may not capture the full extent of the work that girls do in their communities and for social justice movements. Research on girls' movements is often nested within research on women's movements or youth movements. As noted earlier, while girls are present in both movements, there is limited disaggregated data available to shed more light on their specific experiences and contributions.

What counts as impact is also a significant constraint in the evidence base. The wider literature on social movements shows that a broad range of impacts should be considered as positive outcomes, starting with the desired change in the movements' advocacy targets, but also increased social and political recognition of the issues raised, increased collective voice and bargaining power, cultural change, transmission of ideas into public opinion, and discursive shifts in the movements' landscape (Amenta and Polletta, 2019; Useem and Goldstone, 2022). Yet there is poor measurement of these kinds of impacts in the literature on girls' movements, which relies heavily on how girls report change and may therefore miss some of the broader political and social impacts of their activities. Girls' voices are both a strength and a weakness in the literature; they are important reflections on different ways to track impacts according to what girls think is important, but they also arguably offer a limited perspective on girls' contributions to change.

Finally, we are aware that by conducting the literature search in English only, we may be omitting sources in other languages; we hypothesise that there is likely to be more evidence, especially in Spanish, discussing girl-led and youth movements in Latin America.

Findings

1. What does the evidence base look like?

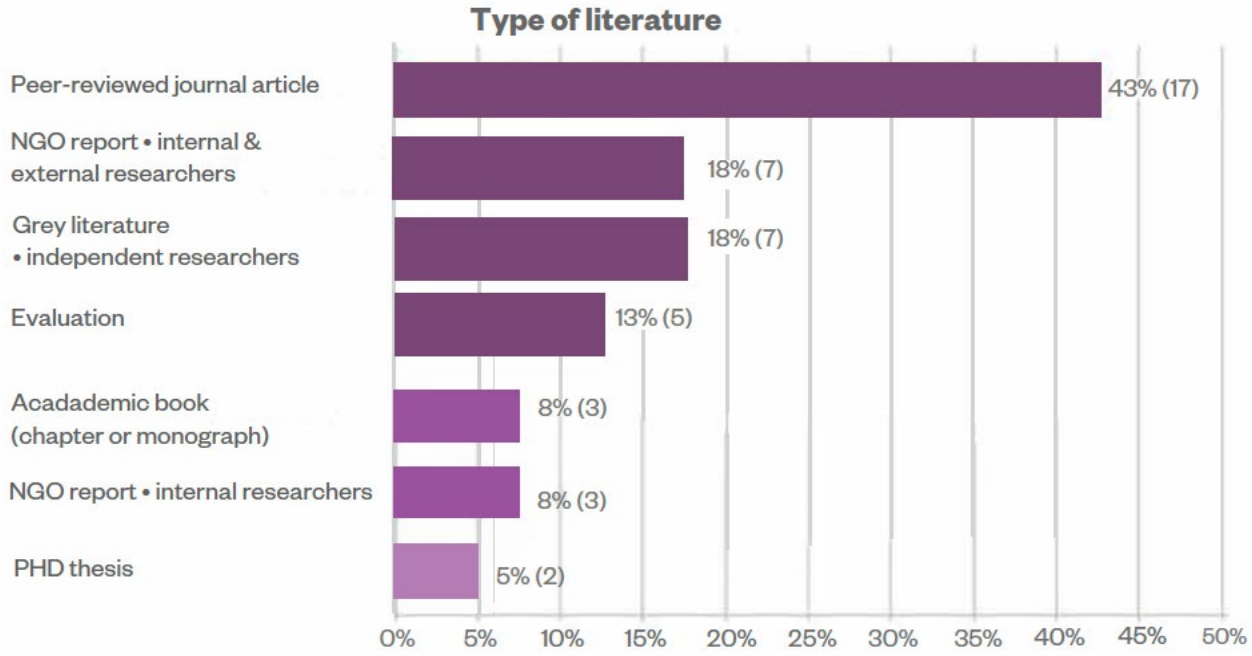
Key findings

- Of the 40 sources included in the literature review, most prioritise exploring the voices and experiences of girls themselves, predominantly through qualitative methods (interviews, focus group discussions, workshops, and participant observation).
- There are also a significant number of desk-based reviews, but just one systematic review to date.
- Literature produced by funders is more likely to use quantitative methods, in part reflecting their access to wider networks.
- Most research is produced with explicit identification with feminist principles.

The evidence base of 40 robust sources all described their research methodology and followed good practice research protocols[2]. Less than half of the sources (17) were peer-reviewed journal articles, considered a high standard of research (Figure 1). Seven sources were classified as grey literature conducted by independent researchers, such as GAGE, and seven were reports commissioned by NGOs and conducted by a research team that included NGO staff and external consultants. Five sources were evaluations of projects or programmes led by girls. The evidence base is therefore relatively independent, although most researchers identify themselves as feminists who are involved in the movements in some capacity (see below). Figures 2a and b show the kinds of methods used to analyse girls' movements and their impacts. Most studies used more than one method, with a common pairing being desk review and interviews.

Much of the literature prioritised exploring the voices and experiences of girls, and the activist-researchers closely involved in the movements, giving them space to reflect on their activities and impacts. Most of the research was conducted by authors who identify themselves as feminist activists, and in line with feminist participatory principles, with many reports detailing their feminist praxis. A small number of reports (usually funders' reports rather than academic articles) included girls as participatory researchers.

Figure 1: Types of literature reviewed



2 Robust evidence adhered to rigorous academic standards such as clear research design, ethical principles, critical examination of the results, transparency of research decisions, peer review, and clear methodologies.

Figure 2: Types of methods used by robust evidence sources

Figure 2a: Methodological approaches

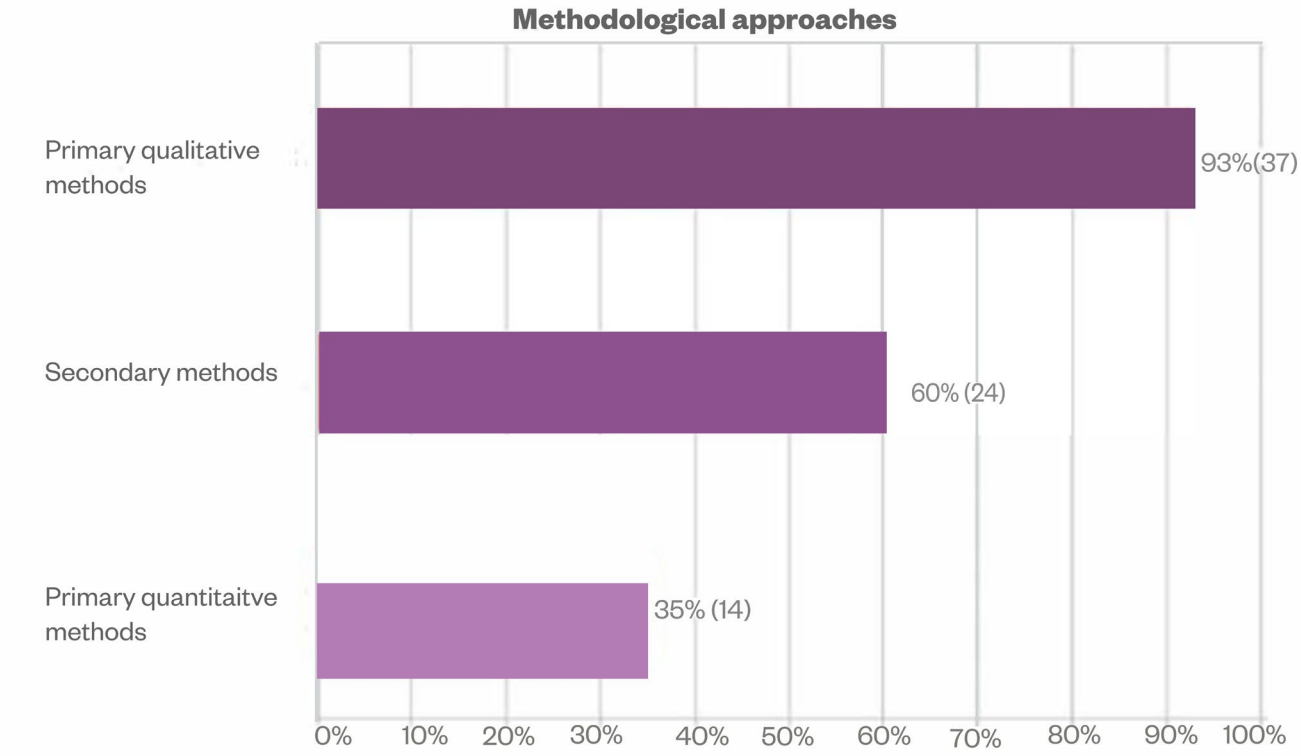
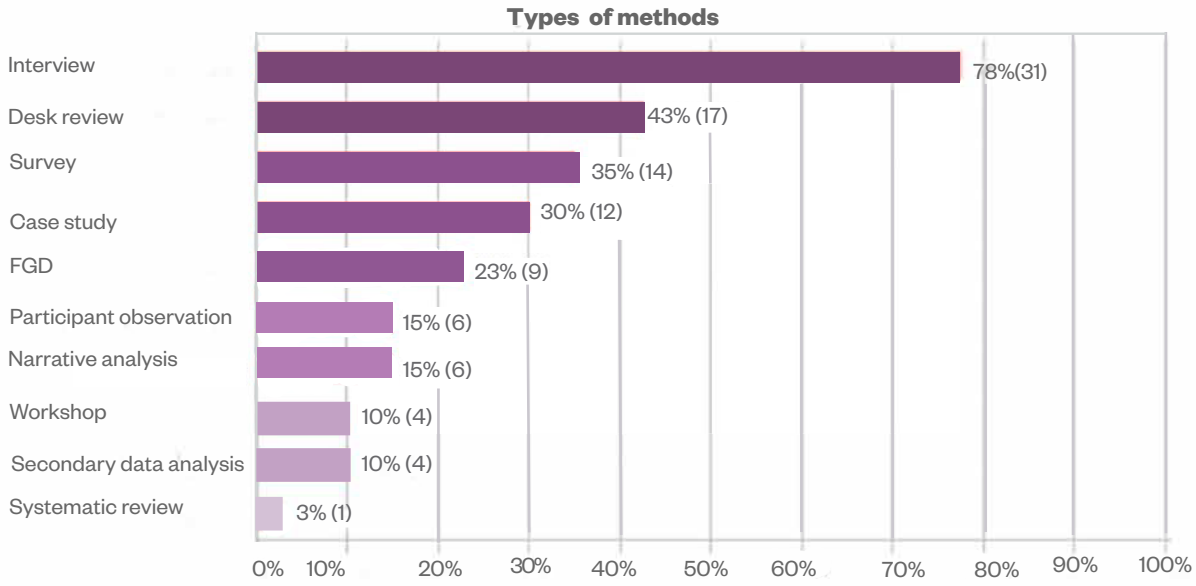


Figure 2b: Types of methods



Primary data collection and analysis

- We found that a large proportion of knowledge products use primary qualitative methods, usually in-depth interviews **(IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs)** with girls, parents, community stakeholders, key informants, policy-makers or government officials, to explore the impacts of girls' movements.
- The category **case study** refers to a synthesis or reflection on a long-term engagement with a group of girls or a movement. It includes sources such as the Purposeful report on out-of-school girls in Sierra Leone (Lister et al., 2021), which included a baseline survey, mentors' survey, and reflection reports via an app, as well as debriefs and monthly staff reflections. Typically adopting varied methods, case studies allow authors to craft a narrative drawn from lengthy experience as well as discrete research projects.
- **Participant observation** is an ethnographic method that also draws on long-term engagement. It is most commonly used by researchers involved in the movement. For example, an academic article by Homan et al. (2018) is a reflection on the authors' participation in the Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), a global advocacy collective working to end violence against women and girls. This method does not clearly delineate between who is a researcher and who is an activist; most authors reflect on their own engagement with feminism and social movements.
- Moving away from girls' voices, about a third of the sources used **quantitative surveys**. Half were funder reports and half from two global series: the State of Youth Civil Society, by Restless Development; and the State of the World's Girls, by Plan International. The funder reports assessed girls' needs, current funding and resourcing, how they experienced the grant-making process, and its effectiveness (e.g. Salazar Rodriguez, 2018; Fried et al., 2019; Purposeful, 2021; Djordjevic, 2022; Arutyunova et al., 2023). Surveys were almost always supported with qualitative in-depth case studies or interviews to give context and nuance to the larger-scale trends.

Primary school in Afar, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2025

Secondary analysis

- **Secondary data analysis** refers to studies that use pre-existing data as part of their report, as in FRIDA's applicants database, for example (FRIDA and AWID, 2019).
- Within this broader category, there was one **systematic review** – Lewin et al. (2023), which reviews development projects by, with and for girls for evidence of their impact.
- **Narrative analysis** refers to methods analysing media coverage, X, discourse analysis, and analysis of campaigns. This method was used to track the discursive shifts around the constructions of 'girlhood' (Robinson, 2024) and girls' activism as an object of development interest (Taft, 2024). It was also used to analyse how girls contributed to narratives – as in Tran et al. (2023), a report for Plan International on girls' activism on climate justice, which used social listening on X to capture 9,000 tweets on climate keywords, as well as interviews, case studies and a survey. This method is useful for examining narrative and framing shifts that girls have made, or about girls, which would not be captured through interviews or surveys.

2. What activities do girls' movements conduct and what modalities do they use?

Key findings

- Girls work across all human rights and development sectors, with a strong focus on gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and climate change. They often work intersectionally and holistically across a number of issues.
- Girls largely rely on community mobilisation and awareness-raising modalities to advance the issues they care about, and there is a strong political advocacy dimension to their work.

Sectors of work

Reviewed sources showed that girls are involved in almost all human rights and development sectors, from climate justice to menstrual hygiene, and from education to preventing child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU). Many of the 40 studies highlighted girls' engagement in these areas:

- **Gender-based violence (GBV):** prevention, response, and awareness-raising on rights.
- **Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)**: often awareness-raising, learning and peer engagement, and occasionally advocacy for policy change. This area includes LGBTQI+ rights, family planning, early marriage, FGM/C, abortion, menstrual health, and sex work.
- **Climate change**: awareness-raising and policy advocacy, usually at national and international levels.

Bodily autonomy, safety and choice emerged as particularly important thematic areas in the sources reviewed, as these are long-term priorities for gender justice movements and directly relevant to adolescent girls' lives. Other studies corroborate that GBV and SRHR are high priorities for girls' movements (FRIDA and AWID, 2019; Plan International, 2023). It is perhaps significant to see climate activism featured highly in the current review; it was not featured in the 2019 FRIDA and AWID responses at all. This speaks in part to the increasing importance of the climate crisis to young people, and the urgency they feel is needed to address it.

Although the sectoral breakdown cited here is useful to understand thematic priorities tackled by girls' movements, most are characterised in the literature as bundling their policy advocacy, awareness-raising and programming, and interweaving topics together for the greater cause of sustainable social justice. Nyambura (2018) highlights that girls' movements are intersectional, inclusive, and non-hierarchical in their organisational structure, seeing the connections between poverty, race, class, climate and gender, and thus less likely to be organised around sectoral issues.

It is important to note that having the flexibility to tackle a variety of issues and themes is often tied to more flexible types of funding. In fact, the more radical organisations and funders are not focused on providing support to specific projects or delimiting what girls should work on; they are interested in supporting girls' own objectives – cognisant that these may change and pivot within the duration of a grant cycle – and provide support to the girls themselves. A good example is Purposeful's work in Sierra Leone, which builds solidarity and power with girls by bringing them together but does not dictate which issues or themes they should engage with (Bransky et al., 2021).

Overall, the review shows that girls are involved in advocating around issues across a broad spectrum. These findings indicate that, while girls' movements do have specific motivations linked to a certain sector or issue, they are often engaged holistically and intersectionally across a number of issues that affect girls' lives (Box 1).

Box 1: Case study: Girls working holistically in Kenya

Okondo et al. (2024) provide a case study in Kenya, commissioned by the Population Council, of how young feminist organisations (YFOs) work across sectors and through various modalities. They find that YFOs are led by young women in their early twenties and older, either as individual activists, part of an informal group, or part of a registered community-based organisation (CBO). The organisations generally comprise 10–20 members. The CBOs are small and focus on local issues, and there are some formally registered NGOs, which tend to focus activities at the national and international levels. Many YFOs rely heavily on donors and resources from established human rights organisations, and operate as local implementing partners.

- **Capacity-building**: peer support, mentorship, workshops, political awareness-raising.
- **Education and service provision**: sexuality education, menstrual hygiene kits and education, GBV survivor support and referrals, livelihood projects to support young women, life-skills sessions.
- **Awareness-raising**: discussions and sensitisation on core topics, often with storytelling and cultural outputs.
- **Advocacy**: participating in international summits, lobbying national governments for commitment to gender equality, demanding inclusion in national and local policy-making.
- **Protests and rallies**: national and international campaigns, e.g. #16Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence.
- **Research and policy analysis**: contributing to action research and analysis.
- **Digital advocacy**: podcasts and social media to raise awareness on key issues.

YFOs have different types of impacts, but the most clearly visible are on legal change around SRHR. Impacts are hard to document, and there are considerable differences in how donors conceive impacts and how YFOs describe them. They record raising awareness, service delivery, and increasing funding as types of impact. They generally do not publish their programme reports, which limits acknowledgement of their work.

Source: Okondo et al., 2014

Modalities

Although girls' movements and activism engage with diverse sectors, they often use the same kinds of approaches to address their goals. An analysis of activities and strategies (Figure 3) showed that girls and young women focus on a combination of local, direct engagement (awareness-raising, community mobilisation, peer engagement, youth groups) and efforts to influence higher-level, national or international outcomes (political participation, campaigns, advocacy).

Political actions at high government levels most often take place through advocacy and participating in formal political channels, including through organised campaigns and lobbying (FRIDA and AWID, 2019). These approaches overlap with the strategies adopted by most social movements, which aim to influence policy through political action; it is also worth noting that participation in a movement is a type of informal political action in itself. The literature that highlights informal political participation mostly focuses on national and international institutions and is closely correlated to conducting advocacy. Robinson (2024) examines the international visibility of girls in recent climate activism, while Bent (2020) looks at supporting girls in the UN system to influence global policy. 'Political participation' also includes protests and direct action, which reach beyond the analysis of formal organisations and policy influencing that takes up a lot of space in the literature. Moraes and Sahasranaman (2018) examine five movements in India that included sit-ins, rallies, protest graffiti, and the Occupy movement. There are multiple routes for political participation; some are more open to girls than others, and some are open to certain girls only – for example, those who can travel to a protest and afford to be seen there.

Beyond trying to influence high-level government and policy structures, girls most often come together for activities likely to benefit themselves and their immediate communities; target audiences thus tend to be local power-holders such as parents, community elders, and sometimes local government. A finding specific to girls' movements is that they are significantly likely to use online digital methods for their campaigns. Girls use social media effectively to spread their message and reach their communities, communicate with each other, conduct hashtag campaigns, and post educational information. At its best, the internet is a democratising space, which reduces hierarchies and creates spaces where anyone can lead (O'Malley and Johnson, 2018). In India, heavy reliance on social media meant that collectives were inclusive; anyone could join the WhatsApp group if they identified with the principles (albeit that internet and phone access were acknowledged as potential barriers to inclusivity) (Moraes and Sahasranaman, 2018). Some of the Indian movements used humour and memes as a strategy to reach a large audience in an accessible way, speaking the 'language' that young people understand. Nonetheless, the literature also warns of online GBV and harassment, citing new forms of abuse, surveillance and control (Nyambura, 2018; Plan International, 2023).

Movements usually employ multiple strategies, and there is some overlap between categories, especially in the case of community-level engagement. A significant amount of girls' organising is around knowledge-building through awareness-raising, local campaigns, peer engagement, and community mobilisation. Two of the reviewed studies cite examples of girls' movements adopting multiple strategies:

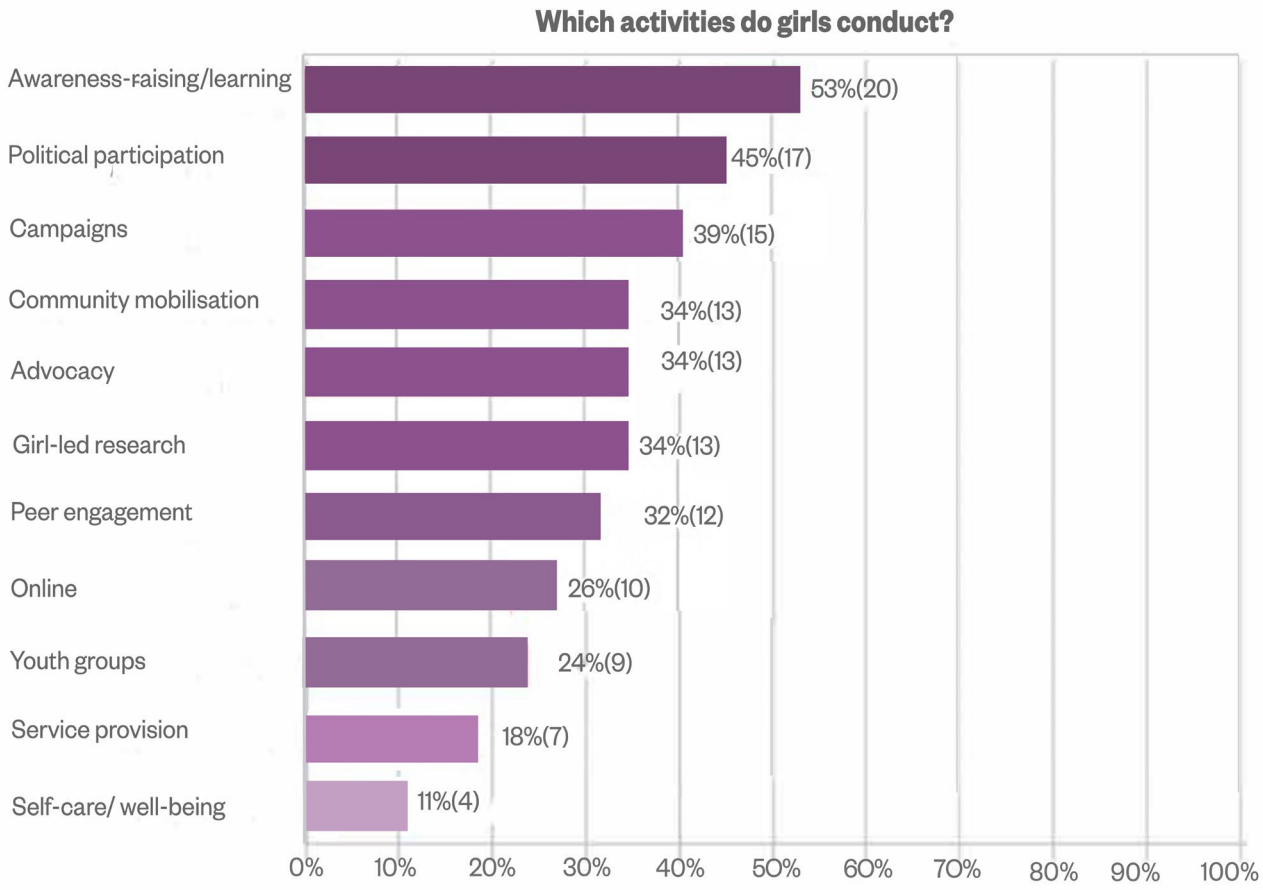
- Tran et al. (2023) describe how girl climate activists in Asia combine approaches: they canvass door-to-door, put up posters, hold webinars, share educational content online, and produce theatre, films and music to spread their messages throughout their local communities.
- Haffejee et al. (2020) explore a youth activist group in South Africa, which addressed early and forced marriage through the production of four short films, coupled with a community awareness dialogue, and a march through the community with posters they created.

'Peer engagement' refers to a focus on peer-to-peer learning or otherwise leveraging peer relationships; this is separate from awareness-raising and community mobilisation because these were usually referenced as specific strategies with a wider reach than immediate peer groups. The Girls' Circle Collectives supported by Purposeful in Sierra Leone are a good example of peer engagement. They provide adolescent girls with a space

to come together, including for near-peer, mentor-led, life-skills sessions that aim to raise feminist collective consciousness to build a movement (Lister et al., 2021). 'Youth groups' refers to the specific activity of setting up regular group meetings to discuss issues or work together to solve problems.

Service delivery did not feature highly in the activities undertaken by girls' movements. In the literature, girls tended to be involved in advocating for improved services, rather than direct service implementation, though there is some evidence that girls do both (Guglielmi et al., 2024).

Figure 3: Which activities do girls conduct?



3. What impacts are girls' movements having?

Key findings

- **The evidence base on the impacts of girls' movements is nascent**: The literature is largely comprised of small-scale case studies on the impacts of girls' collective action and does not employ the full variety of social movement analysis methods available. Impact evaluations of girls' movements are rare.
- The literature does, however, suggest at least five broad types of impacts, with promising indicators at individual, community and civil society levels:
    - **Personal change**: Personal growth and empowerment are commonly reported in the literature and there is considerable evidence on the 'biographical' effects of activism. Many girls report learning more deeply about rights and how to participate in democratic processes, and they value the skills they develop through activism.
    - **Norm change and community impact**: There is relatively more evidence on girls' influence on their community and on norm change. Evidence suggests that girls' movements are making improvements in their communities, including expanding awareness of rights and changing local attitudes on specific campaign issues.
    - **Civil society positioning**: There is some evidence that girls' movements are gaining greater recognition among broader civil society activists and securing solidarity in some contexts.
    - **Policy influence**: Although girls' movements have had some successes in contributing to policy changes, their advocacy efforts frequently meet resistance or indifference from power-holders.

Impacts

For this review, assessment of impacts was divided into categories of personal change and empowerment, direct community impact, social norm change, strengthening how girls' movements are positioned within civil society, and policy influence and legal change. Table 2 sets out the different types of impact, and Figure 4 shows the proportion of reviewed sources that mentioned each type.

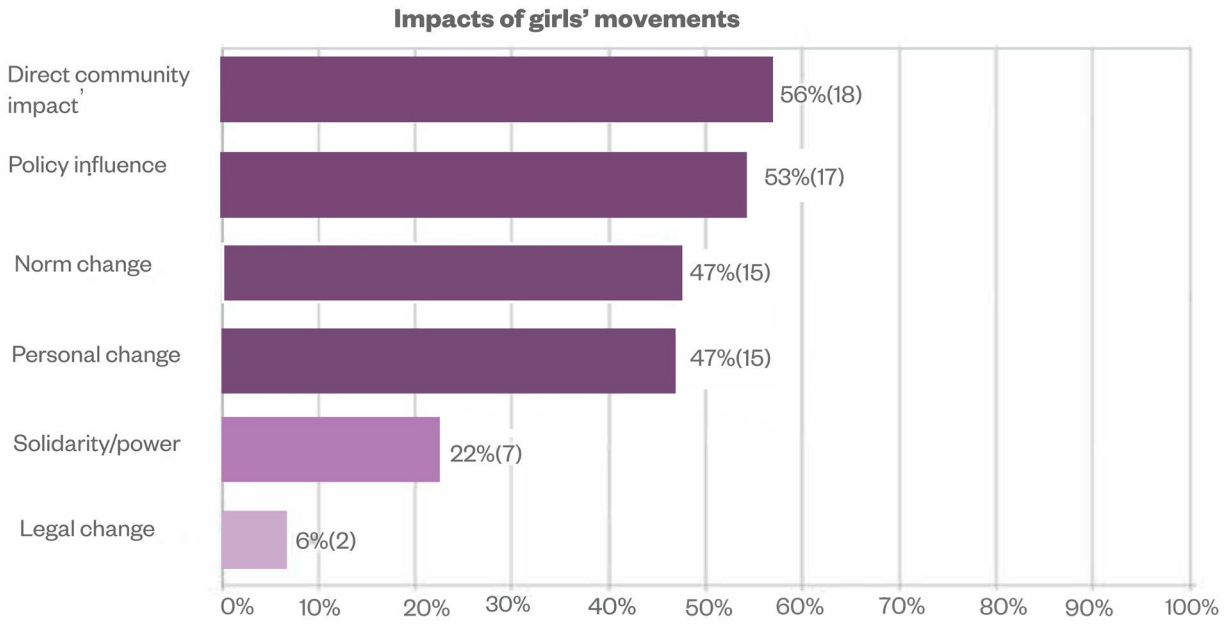
Afar primary school, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

Table 2: Impact types

Type of impact	Definition	Strength of evidence on girls' movements	High-level finding
Personal empowerment	Social movement literature has shown that participation in a movement can have significant 'biographical' effects on participants, such as increasing confidence, self-esteem, well-being, and belief that joint efforts are making a difference (Vestergren et al., 2017; da Costa et al., 2023).	Good level of evidence, including in peer-review journal articles. Limited engagement with wider literature on social movements.	Robust evidence that girls' movements empower participants.
Community impact	Girls' movements involved in delivering services (e.g. access to schools, skills-building opportunities, sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services), raising awareness, or leveraging peer groups, to achieve tangible change in their communities.	Some evidence, primarily case study-based.	Girls' movements are contributing to small-scale impacts at community level, especially on girls' access to schools and SRH services.
Social norm change	Efforts to bring about a shift in dominant norms that discriminate against or disempower girls (e.g. by working with role models or champions of change), developing alliances with religious or traditional leaders who can shape cultural norms, etc.	Good evidence on girls' engagement in social norm change efforts but limited evidence on actual impacts – and especially on the relative contribution of girls' movements to those impacts.	Girls' movements are actively involved in efforts to change social norms around child marriage, GBV, FGM/C, and disability rights.

Strengthening the positioning of girls' movements within civil society	Movement-building – both of girls' movements and also building recognition and solidarity with other social movements.	Limited evidence, but this is partly a framing issue. Movement-building often focuses on personal empowerment rather than contributions to building spaces for collective action and amplifying girls' movement recognition and solidarity within broader civil society.	Good evidence on the importance of adult mentorship and connections with feminist movements. This is generally regarded as strengthening girls' capacities and likelihood of success – through scaffolding, training, experiential learning, facilitating access to power. There is some literature examining this relationship, in academic articles. Yet it does not always frame it as 'movement-building', more likely framed as 'conditions for success' or girls' empowerment.
Policy influence and legal change	Influencing policy change to support girls' rights and bringing about legal changes to benefit girls' rights.	Limited evidence, primarily from NGO reports and in cross-movement literature and it remains difficult to tease out girls' specific contributions in this area.	Limited number of examples in the literature (e.g. the Green Tide). Plenty of evidence that girls have policy-influencing goals, and examples of where they lobby community, municipal, or local governance. The international level has a lot of literature from the climate movement. Yet evidence of actual impact is limited – in part due to age- and gender-related discriminatory perceptions of what girls can do/ achieve.

Figure 4: What kinds of impacts do girls' movements have?



Dancing girls, Oromia, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

Girls' movements mostly described their impacts as being directly on their community (56%) or policy influence (53%). We triangulated the types of impacts against the sectors identified, but did not find any significant results. Most sectors aimed for policy influence, followed by direct community impact. The climate sector understandably focuses heavily on policy influence, as climate change requires national and international commitment and cannot be addressed only at the community level.

Overall, the literature tends to focus on girls' actions, methods of organising and campaigning, their goals, and barriers to their participation and success, but there is no strong analysis or metrics to measure their impacts. A substantial part of the literature describes barriers to girls' impacts, including gender and age discrimination, and not being taken seriously by power-holders. Although girls have been 'heroised' as champions (Taft, 2020) and the answer to development problems through the 'girl effect' (Walters, 2024), they still report that their demands and insights are ignored.

Personal change

As already noted, the literature on girls' movements often highlights biographical impacts. These include subjective changes such as identity (including in contexts of displacement – see Haider, 2024), empowerment, and self-esteem, as well as external changes such as deepening community relationships, and different work and life trajectories as a result of participating (Vestergren et al., 2017; Salazar Rodriguez, 2018). Three studies cite examples:

- 70% of the 1,000 respondents in the State of the World's Girls report said that activism has increased their confidence and they have learnt new skills; 95% say their activism has had a positive impact on them (Plan International, 2023).
- Mulhern, Youssef and Bransky (2022) evidence how participation in Purposeful's Girls' Circles Collectives led to stories of girls' increased confidence, ability to speak up for themselves at home, and changing self-perceptions as rights-holders.
- A study on children's activism to prevent child marriages in Bangladesh and Ghana (Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2022) shows that participants felt great pride in their increased confidence and capacity to act, and affirmation of their worth (Box 2).

Role-modelling and leading by example were strong themes in the literature (Box 3). Guglielmi et al. (2024) highlight that girl activists often feel they are role models, inspiring others in their community, especially girls. In South Africa, young women activists identified that activism starts with the self – that in order to be advocates for other young women, they needed to have self-respect and live their values (de Lange and Moletsane, 2021).

Participating in a feminist social movement has strong impacts on how girls grow up, with feminism becoming a way of life rather than a subject of activism. The literature shows that many girls state they learn new ways to live because of activism. In Argentina, Green Tide is an example of a wide social movement driven by girls (Artazo et al., 2021). Young feminists involved in that movement report impacts on how they live everyday feminism, and feel they are undertaking activism daily through how they live. In Mexico City, young activists who have moved into employment described how they applied feminist principles at work (Chen, 2019). For some, this meant challenging unequal power relations at work to instate horizontal management and consensus-building; for others, it meant rejecting traditional employment to demonstrate the feminist principles of autonomy and self-determination.

Box 2: Case study: Preventing child marriage

Bangladesh and Ghana have both outlawed marriage before the age of 18, but 51% of girls marry before 18 in Bangladesh and 16% in Ghana (Girls not Brides, 2025). A research study interviewed girls and boys aged 10–17 who had participated in child parliaments where they learned about and acted to claim their rights, including preventing child marriage. When participants heard about a potential child marriage, they would meet in their forum to discuss, then go as a group to the family's house to try to prevent the marriage. If they failed, they would first escalate to adult community leaders, and then to the police if necessary.

Adolescents saw their activities as 'rescuing' their peers, seeing themselves almost as vigilantes engaged in a just cause – saving lives and improving their communities. They felt they were role models, and had considerable pride in their actions.

Relationships with adults were important in this process. In the child forums, adult support was essential for learning skills, communication means, and providing a gathering space to facilitate adolescent activism. Adults were also necessary as power-holders to stop any potential child marriage. However, there were some negative impacts; for example, parents of potential child brides sometimes behaved disrespectfully to the adolescent activists. But over time, the child forums' work began to change adult attitudes about adolescents' capabilities, increasing respect for the value of their interventions and as social actors in their own right. Officials responsible for stopping child marriages became reciprocal partners with adolescents and were more successful in preventing marriages. The adult 'scaffolding' helped adolescents become more successful in their activism.

The impacts of activism are therefore multiple: personal empowerment of the activists involved; decreasing the number of child marriages; changing social norms around early marriage; and changing attitudes around adolescent activism.

Source: Girls Not Brides, 2025; Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2022.

Box 3: Case study: What are the effects of role-modelling and mentorship on girls' movements?

Investing in movement leaders could be theorised as a route to investing in all girls, through the spillover effects and leadership provided by role models. Some girl role models work directly as peer mentors, often in girls' clubs, providing guidance and building girls' life skills and knowledge. There is limited but promising evidence that mentors play a role in positive behaviour change (Pincock et al., 2024).

Shared spaces and mentors have the potential to build solidarity and reshape girls' expectations around their roles and rights, which are components of movement-building (Temin, Blake and Roca, 2023). They may build connections and foster a sense of collective identity. When girl role models successfully engage in collective action, it can strengthen other girls' belief that they can achieve change, and increase their willingness to participate in a movement. However, these spillover effects and pathways are not yet well evidenced for effects on girls' movements specifically, as research tends to focus on mentoring outcomes like health or livelihoods.

A mentorship position can support girls to develop their leadership and management skills and connect them to community leaders (Temin, Blake and Roca, 2023). Thus, investing in girls' clubs and empowerment programmes is also an investment in girls' movement building, as these programmes create leaders and advocates who drive change.

Direct community impacts and norm change

The evidence base on girl-led norm change and direct community impacts is relatively substantial.

Girl-led activities often focus on making tangible changes in their community – for example, changing parental attitudes about appropriate age of marriage, raising awareness of the physical harms of FGM/C, distributing hygiene kits or as in the case of Ethiopia's Queerroo youth protest movement adolescent girls were also engaged in supporting community development such as establishing water points to reduce travel time to water sources for girls and women (Jones et al., 2024). Peer-to-peer empowerment through girls' clubs was also noted, including Girl Up in Hanoi, which fundraised and donated computers to establish an information hub for girls in a secondary school and organised office skills classes (Purnamasari and Konety, 2023).

However, due to the lack of rigorous evaluation research, the evidence of these impacts – and their longevity – is slim. FRIDA's former directors identify that small-scale change at the community level may be as meaningful or even more so than high-level policy influence (O'Malley and Johnson, 2018). What is clear from the existing evidence base is that girls' successes at the community level should be supported with efforts to change structural inequalities at scale – something that requires the involvement of a range of actors, from government and community leaders to donors, civil society groups, and UN/NGOs.

Challenging discriminatory social norms often underlies girls' activism, and there is a growing evidence base as to how girls' movements are contributing to reshaping norms, both through their movements and through role-modelling behaviour they want to see (Guglielmi et al., 2024). Findings from Lewin et al. (2023) show that projects by girls focus strongly on norm change and behaviour change, rather than health, education and livelihoods (for example).

In the literature reviewed, we note the following examples of norm change:

- Guglielmi et al. (2024) identify girl-led initiatives as correlated with changes in schools. Teachers now appear more accepting of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and more understanding of the negative effects of cat-calling, while students have a better understanding of sexual consent – all of which play a part in girls having positive school experiences. These community impacts are gradually translating into norm change around expectations of girls' behaviour.
- Mulhern, Youssef and Bransky (2022) reference examples of girls resisting child marriage in Sierra Leone, assisted by their participation in Purposeful's Girls' Circles Collectives. As a result of individual resistance, some communities have begun to see shifts in attitudes towards early marriage among parents and community leaders.
- Another example is the case of a man who raped a child, which was reported to a Girls' Circle that was able to find and report the perpetrator. The girls' insistence on pursuing the case led to a prosecution and imprisonment – a watershed moment in that community, entirely driven by girls (Mulhern, Youssef and Bransky, 2022).

Strengthening girls' positioning and recognition in civil society

The wider literature on social movements shows that a broad range of impacts should be considered as positive outcomes. Increased social and political recognition of the issues raised, increased collective voice and bargaining power, cultural change, transmission of ideas into public opinion, and discursive shifts in the movements' landscape (Amenta and Polletta, 2019; Useem and Goldstone, 2022) are impacts girls' movements appear to have, yet for which the evidence could be strengthened. The impacts of girls' movements (as detailed below) are often described in terms of developing a group presence and voice, a collective identity, and recognition by others of girls' voices. The impacts of girls' movements might therefore be described as most evident in how they help girls to develop their capabilities, building a new generation of leaders with an emerging collective politicised identity.

Some literature examines how girls' activism produces a change in how people view girls – as leaders, strong and capable. Purposeful has shown that other organisations in its network became more likely to employ women, and attitudes about girls' capabilities had changed after those organisations worked with Purposeful (Mulhern et al., 2022). Purposeful's grantee partners reported a perceived change in how the rest of the community views girls, being more likely to see girls as capable of making decisions, bringing about positive social change, and recognising their contributions to community life (Purposeful, 2021).

This area of impact aligns with social movement analysis of the creation and recognition of an interest group as a collective actor (Amenta and Polletta, 2019).

Policy influence

'Policy' influence led by gender equality movements ranges from influence on international agreements on climate change, to local schools' policy on girls' spaces, and from influencing public opinion to mobilising constituencies to pressure policy-makers and hold them to account (Weldon and Htun, 2013). The wider literature shows that, on women's rights, feminist activism is a critical factor driving positive policy change (ibid.).

The literature on girls' contributions to influencing policy is much more nascent, and the impacts have tended to be relatively small-scale, with the partial exception of the Green Tide movement, which is widely cited but is atypical. We note the following examples from the reviewed studies:

- The Green Tide movement achieved a landmark legal change for safe abortion in Argentina in 2020. Subsequently spreading across Latin America, it owed its success to social momentum, including girl-led and youth-led work, utilising large-scale public mobilisations of feminist groups working together with a deliberately decentralised and pluralist approach (Khan and Sharp, 2025). The wider literature finds that this movement had a critical impact on reproductive justice, catalysing political, policy, legal and norm change. Although the reviewed studies only include one resource on the specific contribution of girls to the Green Tide (Artazo et al., 2021), it is commonly understood as having been driven by young people, especially young women. Artazo et al. (2021) identify young people's participation as catapulting the efforts of previous waves of activism by achieving a critical mass, and in particular through creative and eye-catching methods (such as the green bandana).
- In Kenya, young feminists participated in a wider campaign that led to an amendment in the National Security Law, which recommends a jail term of up to 20 years for perpetrators found guilty of privacy invasion and forcible public stripping (Okondo et al., 2024). Young people were active using the hashtag #MydressMychoice, which increased their voice in the wider debate.
- In China, a young feminist movement successfully used protests to increase the number of public toilets available for girls and women (Li and Li, 2017). In contrast to older NGOs, and because young feminists lacked the networks and social capital of their older counterparts, they adopted media mobilisation and 'making news' as their main tactic instead. By creating their protests in such a way that Chinese state media was able to report on them without fear of repercussion, they harnessed media attention and gained legitimacy for their messages. Media discussion of the shortage of women's public toilets resulted in several medium-sized cities increasing the number of toilets. This mobilisation was partly successful because it was an uncontroversial issue that gained wide public support, and partly because the young women involved used media pressure as a policy lever, as well as directly lobbying the government.
- In Guatemala, Gammage et al. (2019) describe a Rise Up project in which girls successfully lobbied the mayor to allow girls' representation in all municipal decisions. The report does not describe particular interest areas, but refers to girls' participation in governance as a right in itself. Girls targeted the municipal level as a realistic one, and leveraged the post-conflict settlement that allowed 'any organised sector' to participate. Achieving their right to representation was perceived as a success in itself, whether or not they will subsequently go on to exert influence over decisions.
- In Sierra Leone, Mulhern et al. (2022) describe how a group of girls with disabilities successfully advocated for a community by-law to protect people with disabilities from mocking and harassment.

Overall, however, Gammage et al. (2019) note that success often lies in changing the attitudes of powerful individuals to become more convinced to support girls' agendas, rather than increases in girls' power itself. Bent (2020) reflects on her experience as an adult supporting girls' participation at a Girls Speak Out (GSO) celebration event for the International Day of the Girl at the United Nations in New York. Her overall message is that GSO, while well-attended and enjoyable, fell short of influencing policy. The discussion shows that such a highly choreographed event did not allow a real conversation or engagement with policy-makers, who kept their comments bland, albeit supportive. She concludes that some aspects of girls' participation at the UN are performative, and that real influence likely comes through other forms of engagement.

5. How does resourcing relate to impact?

Key findings

- Girls receive limited funding from external sources. Girls' activism is usually funded through grants for discrete projects. Girl movements consistently call for more flexible core funding.
- Yet there is little evidence on whether and how core funding leads to greater or different impacts.
- The evidence does not clearly show which funding modalities lead to which kinds of impacts, as most research does not set out to track or disentangle these pathways.
- The evidence suggests that in-kind resourcing is also valued by girls and young women who seem to particularly benefit from mentoring and ally relationships with more experienced feminist activists; and from capacity-building initiatives.

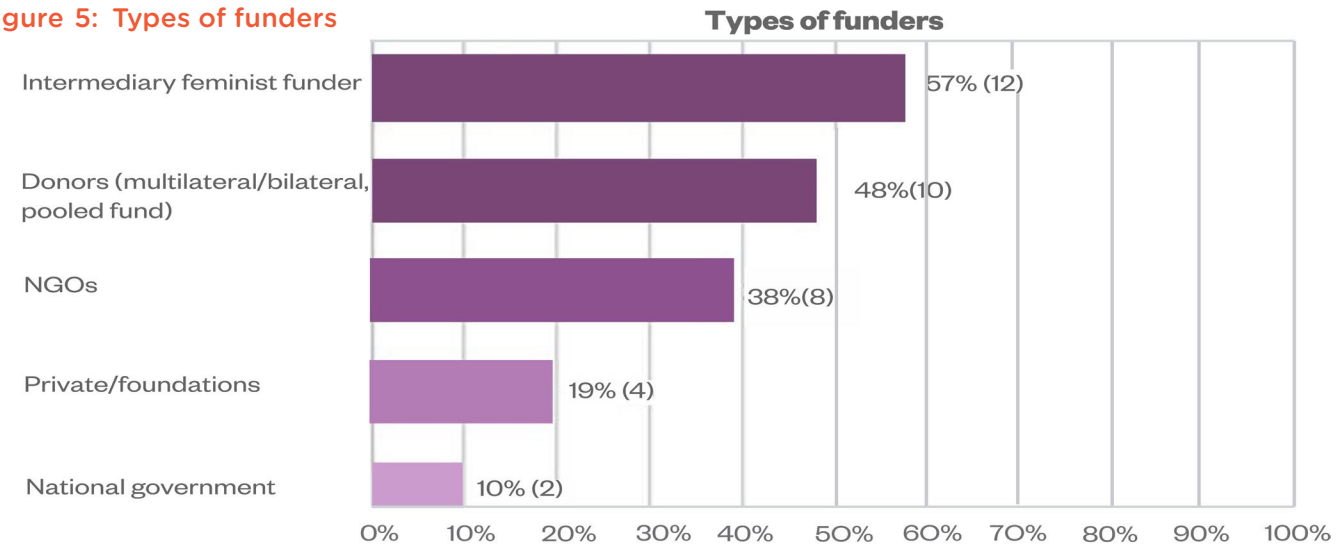
The review analyses best practices for resourcing girls' movements, including which support and funding modalities are most useful and most impactful. There is a small but strong set of literature from intermediary feminist funders such as Mama Cash, AWID, FRIDA and Purposeful, analysing their approaches and seeking to show impacts of their novel ways to resource girls, although they acknowledge the difficulties of demonstrating how different resourcing modalities are tied to impacts (Fried et al., 2019). As noted throughout, our review is limited to robust evidence, which means that much of the funders' own reporting (such as annual reports and thought leadership) is missing, unless those outputs were conducted using robust research methods. This section looks at the evidence on how resourcing relates to impact; it does not discuss the resourcing barriers to girls' movements, which are well-documented elsewhere (e.g. FRIDA and AWID, 2019; Plan International, 2023). Instead, we focus on what the evidence actually shows about resourcing impacts.

Overview of funding modalities

It is important to note that the global survey of FRIDA's applications database shows that more than half of the YFOs had never received any source of income (FRIDA and AWID, 2019). Of movements that do receive funding, most do so through intermediaries – often women's funds – as well as larger women's and child-focused NGOs (Salazar Rodriguez, 2018; FRIDA and AWID, 2019).

For the 40 sources reviewed, we detail how often each type of funder was mentioned (Figure 5). Intermediary feminist funders such as FRIDA and Purposeful were mentioned most frequently, while donor governments and multilaterals were second. These donors were not usually offering ODA as part of bilateral government disbursements, but more likely multilateral organisations, such as UNICEF and UNFPA, and pooled funds such as the Global Resilience Fund.

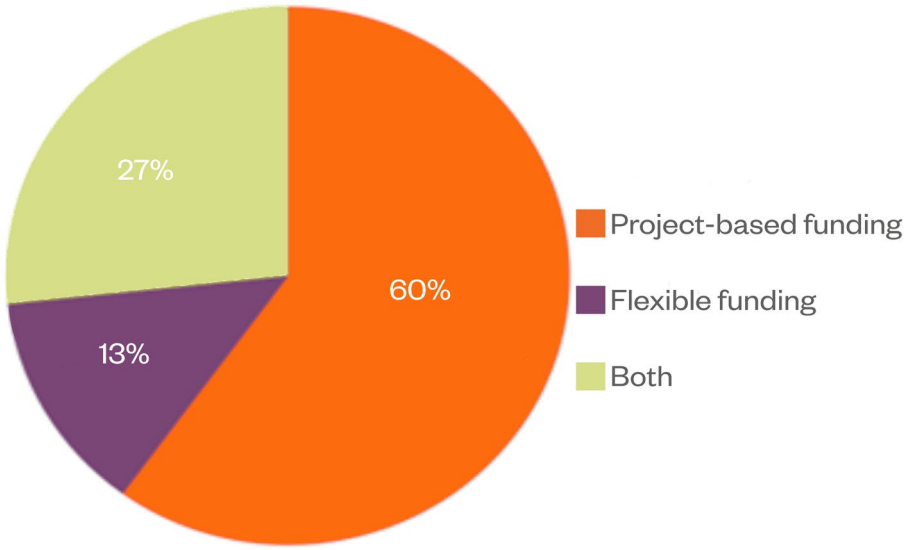
Figure 5: Types of funders



The literature search prioritised looking through the resources of the feminist funders, so they are possibly over-represented in the database of 40 sources.

The review suggested that girls' movements and activism receive both core funding and project grants. Most reviews of funding to girl-led organising, however, identify that such activities are usually funded through grants for discrete projects, and girls consistently call for more flexible core funding (Arutyunova et al., 2023). In Guglielmi et al.'s (2024) review of the resourcing landscape for girls, 60% of the organisations received only project funding (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Current types of of funding received by girl-and youth-led organisations in the Global South



Funding modalities and impacts

Core grants allow movements to pivot when necessary. A good example is during the Covid-19 pandemic, when movements often suddenly shifted their work towards emergency support, frontline services, and mental health support. Organisations with core funding were more able to do this in response to changing needs, than those with fixed project goals (Modungwa et al., 2021). Flexible funding also facilitates upskilling girls in financial management and allocation of resources, as they take responsibility for deciding how to spend the funds (Fried et al., 2019).

On the other hand, girls state that project-based funding often limits their effectiveness, forcing them to focus on issues that are not necessarily the most relevant or those where they can make the most impact (Restless Development, 2023). Project funds usually cannot be used for organisational development and capacity-building, which limits the sustainability of the organisations and their long-term impacts as a movement (Nyambura, 2018; Guglielmi et al., 2024). Furthermore, project-based funds can turn girls into 'implementing partners' (Okondo et al., 2024) rather than movement leaders.

Box 4: Case study: Emergency response Global Resilience Fund

The Global Resilience Fund was started by Purposeful during the Covid-19 pandemic to directly support and fund girls and young women responding to the crisis. It continues to exist, now supporting other crisis responses led by girls. Modungwa et al. (2021) describe some lessons from the Fund.

The report shows that young feminists provided critical psychological and well-being support during the pandemic, giving mental health support and providing safe spaces to vulnerable girls, including those fleeing family violence. They also provided basic services and emergency relief to their constituencies. Because the Fund grantees were mostly grassroots groups, they had first-hand experience of community needs and engaged on a shared level with the communities and girls their programmes sought to target. This was a pivot for some grantees, as basic service delivery is not usually considered part of social movement activism, but became so during the pandemic.

Purposeful's management of the Global Resilience Fund can be considered a best practice example. Purposeful mobilised a rapid response fund that gave core and flexible funding to grassroots groups. In part, this was facilitated by trust among the donor pool, in which people had worked together for a long time. Trust meant that donors were willing to waive some of the usual proposal requirements in order to respond more quickly and trust the girls to use the funding effectively, without stringent reporting requirements. Both funders and girls sitting on the advisory panels challenged the Fund's accountability to intersectional principles throughout the grant-making process , meaning that funding went to many excluded groups, particularly girls with disabilities.

Source: Modungwa et al., 2021.

The impacts of core grants might be tracked differently from project grants (Guglielmi et al., 2024). As the funding is not tied to project goals, grantees can report back on the full range of their activities, including organisational development, personal skills development, and investments in infrastructure, for example (ibid.). Organisational impacts might be reflected as developing cohesion and responsibility about how they function, as one of FRIDA's grantees reported (Djordjevic, 2022: 87). Purposeful's girl mentors, who receive a stipend, use it for a number of purposes like starting a business or returning to school, which means the impacts are sometimes recorded as personal change (Lister et al., 2021). Another of Purposeful's Girls' Circle Collectives used their small business earnings and fundraising to pay for the legal and medical costs of a rape case (Mulhern et al., 2022: 39).

Girls' movements also receive core funding from sources other than donors, such as other forms of income generation, employment income of girl members, membership fees, crowdfunding, donations, and other fundraising activities. Seven sources reported being employed or financially compensated for their activist labour, including Purposeful's girl mentors, who receive a stipend. Five sources said their organising was 'self-funded' from income generation or fundraising. A large amount of girls' work is voluntary and/or self-funded. With a view to impacts, girls seem to see these sources of funding as providing independence, away from donor constraints and politics they may disagree with (FRIDA and AWID, 2019: 76).

Participatory grant-making, mentioned in six sources, is an emerging practice that aims to shift power dynamics towards girls to decide what to fund. A common model is that following an initial round of background checks by the funders, girls' advisory panels assess shortlisted applications from other girl-led initiatives and choose which to fund. This changes the power dynamics to give girls space to lead and has potential to create different kinds of impacts. Funders using a participatory model often give core grants, so the participatory findings can be read as relevant to core funding impacts too.

Participatory grant-making has multiple impacts on the girls who participate as decision-makers, and those whom they fund. Reports from the Global Resilience Fund (see Box 4) and FRIDA both show that girls' decisions directed funds towards issues that were usually under-represented and underfunded, including girls with disabilities (Modungwa et al., 2021; Djordjevic, 2022). The girls who ran the process felt validated and recognised by being trusted with financial decisions, and gained confidence and skills (Purposeful, 2021). FRIDA's young grant-makers describe their participation as making them feel included and accountable to broader young feminist movements (Djordjevic, 2022). For applicants to Purposeful, receiving support from other young feminists was validating and helped them see a collective value to their work (Purposeful, 2021: 21). External validation

is also important to girls – having someone else believe in them and their work has a significant impact. When girls are trusted as leaders, especially by an international funder, this also seems to have some spillover effects in how communities perceive girls, making them more likely to recognise girls' capacities and to support their work (Purposeful, 2021). These types of impacts are not necessarily the outcomes that donors and others request in reports about what girls' movements have achieved, but the impacts of participatory grant-making are much wider and deeper than achieving movement goals, including personal and social power-building that can shift norms.

Triangulating the funding modalities against the type of impacts identified for this review (policy influence, legal change, direct community impact, norm change, personal change, solidarity/power) did not reveal any significant patterns. Most types of impacts were mentioned in relation to most types of funding. However, it is also fair to say that the sources included in our evidence base did not attempt to systematically disaggregate impacts by resourcing type.

These findings must be interpreted with caution as the evidence is not clear. But they can be taken as an indication that feminist funders are making a strong impression on the funding landscape for girls' movements, and are beginning to turn the direction of resourcing to more participatory processes that recognise empowerment as an outcome.

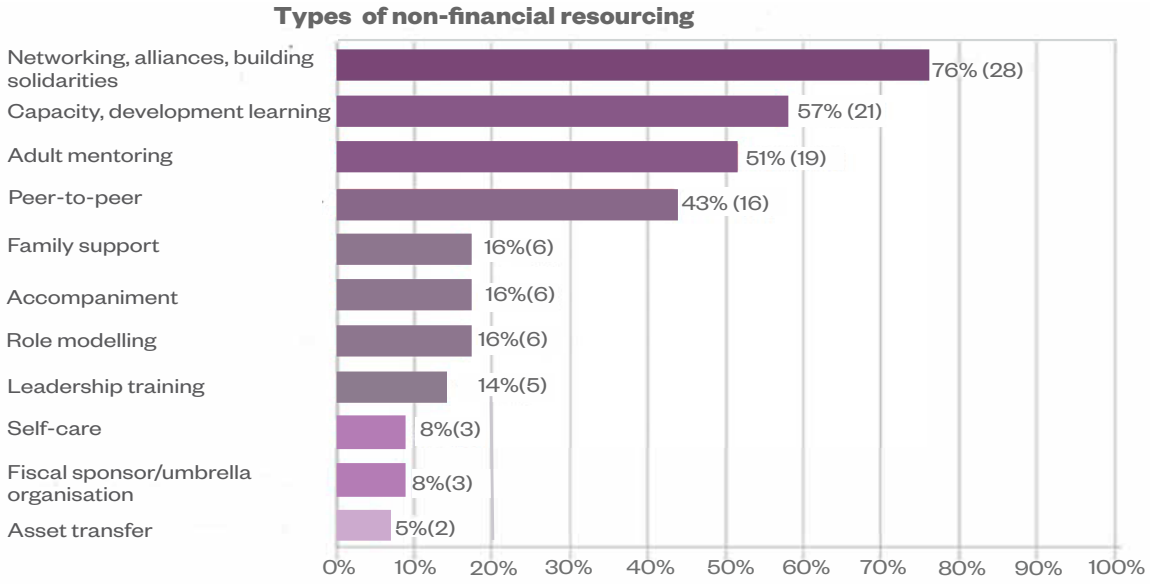
Other types of non-financial resourcing

Beyond funding, our review identifies some other types of resourcing that girls' movements access (Figure 7).

Again, there was no significant pattern when looking at these types of resourcing against different types of impacts, likely because the sources were not seeking to examine this relationship.

When funders and/or partners support girls with networking opportunities and alliance-building opportunities, this is viewed as a source of strength that helps girls situate themselves within broader feminist movements, and helps them to learn, connect to people with more formal power, and build momentum. Most of the research reports that young women and girls are in touch with established feminist groups in their country and internationally. This sense of connection and working for a wider cause builds solidarity and empathy towards fellow movement organisers (Djordjevic, 2022). New partnerships, collaboration, and shared learning may spring from networking, making movements more effective in achieving their goals (Salazar Rodriguez, 2018). In India, young feminist protestors used similar slogans and chants to other political left-wing protest movements, which lent them credibility and generated support among other activists (Moraes and Sahasranaman, 2018).

Figure 7: Types of non-financial resourcing



In the Green Tide movement in Argentina, young people situated themselves within an older and wider feminist movement that laid the pathways for a new generation to engage, and young feminists also saw themselves as achieving a right (to abortion) for future generations (Artazo et al., 2021). In this way, they understood their particular moment as part of a historical process and an intergenerational dialogue. More widely, social movements often grow in strength and success when they work constructively with different groups and build coalitions around specific issues or policy moments (Khan and Sharp, 2025).

Intergenerational connections and adult mentorship emerge as strong themes in the literature. Without negating the agency and power of girls, the evidence shows that they rely on partnerships with adults to achieve their goals. Sometimes this is with mentors who have more access to resources, sometimes because adults are the policy-makers and power-holders, and sometimes drawing learning and sustenance from experienced feminist activists. Occasionally, this is referred to as 'scaffolding', where adults provide the support and resources to create space for girls to run their campaigns effectively (Edell et al., 2016). One important role that adults play is in facilitating girls' presence at high-level events and introducing them to policy-makers. In Guatemala and Honduras, Rise Up activities leveraged the personal networks of adult allies to secure opportunities for girls to meet political decision-makers, which was successful in achieving policy change (Gammage et al., 2019). And in South Africa, Haffejee et al. (2020) discuss why they chose to present girls' views for them at a meeting with traditional authorities, to protect girls from a backlash. The wider literature on activism recognises the necessity of allies, networks, mentors, and an 'ecology of support' for successful movements (Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2022); girls and young people seem to particularly benefit from relationships with more experienced feminist activists.

However, adult–youth partnerships can have challenging power dynamics, and it can be hard to escape from power inequalities that value adults' knowledge and voices over those of young people, even within feminist movements (Guglielmi et al., 2024). Artazo et al. (2021) discussed both the intergenerational tensions and strengths of the Green Tide movement in Argentina, where some older activists felt that young people's digital activism was not as effective or meaningful as direct action, whereas young people felt they were harnessing new ways of making an impact. In India, young activists sometimes felt disapproval of their methods from senior activists, because of the young people's disruption of the way a protest 'should' be carried out (Moraes and Sahasranaman, 2018). Young feminist organisations in Kenya reported that older feminist activists and organisations dominate the landscape, particularly in high-level political advocacy (Okondo et al., 2024). Being overlooked or talked down to by older feminists is particularly hurtful for girls (Salazar Rodriguez, 2018), as they should be natural allies. It seems that age and gender discrimination towards girls' activism can also come from within the allied movements. Although there is no clear evidence that being well-networked leads to greater impacts, adult allies can 'open doors' to power-holders for girls, and girls' voices suggest that they highly value working collectively with allies and seeing themselves as part of a movement.

After networking and alliances, the literature discusses capacity-building for girls as a central means of non-financial resourcing for girls' movements, connected to the empowerment aspects of movement-building. Capacity-building is usually in the form of training from adults on specific skills, such as advocacy, leadership, peer mentoring, or organisational management; followed by knowledge strengthening on rights and specific issue areas. The impacts of capacity-building are mostly seen in personal growth, agency, and increased personal efficacy, but also in practical project management skills that make the work of girls' movements more effective. The literature reports girls' increased confidence, awareness of rights, and ability to speak up as core outcomes from capacity-building, with some possible policy outcomes too. In Honduras, Rise Up's week-long advocacy training course for girls had some policy success on municipal commitments to increase the budget to prevent teen pregnancy and implement comprehensive sexuality education (Gammage et al., 2019). The training taught public speaking skills, how to develop an advocacy strategy, and media training. In Vietnam, girls with disabilities engaged in workshops to imagine themselves as leaders, which changed how they perceived themselves (Nguyen et al., 2021). Capacity-building for girls' empowerment is a longstanding aid and development approach.

Discussion

This study set out to explore the evidence on and the impacts of girls' movements. The findings provide new insights into where girls' movements have been effective, and some understanding of the different types of resourcing they draw on. In this section, we interpret these results and consider their implications.

Challenges in disentangling impacts

The review of 40 sources that were categorised as robust evidence showed that documenting girls' impacts is an ongoing challenge. This is partly because it is difficult to prove that a social movement has directly and distinctly contributed to a particular change (Amenta and Polletta, 2019), and partly because not only are resources for girls' movements limited, but there has also been very limited investment in methodologically rigorous evaluations of impacts.

In the wider literature collated for this review (159 sources), there are dozens of examples of positive impacts of girls' movements, but these are often presented either as anecdotes, a spotlight on an individual girl's story, or contained in blog posts or other informal writing. Girls themselves have called for placing higher value on narrative reporting and alternative metrics of impacts. When girls are involved as evaluators, they tend to produce nuanced evaluations that look at processes as well as outcomes, focusing on what matters most to girls (Lewin et al., 2023). Guglielmi et al. (2024) also draw out the importance of process indicators for girls, given that girls' meaningful participation and empowerment are often as important as the activities they conduct.

However, an over-reliance on girls' own measures of reporting does not give a full picture of their impacts. An emphasis on girls' voices perhaps glosses over the difficulties that girls have in reporting, with limited capacity and budget for monitoring and evaluation that meet donor standards (ibid.). One such difficulty is that girls' assessments often cite outputs rather than impacts (Okondo et al., 2024).

Social movement analysis can use a variety of methods to document impacts, such as media analysis, policy document review, discourse analysis or surveys to gauge public opinion changes, but these methods were not regularly used in the literature reviewed here. Instead, the girls' movements analysis relies on small-scale case studies reporting girls' own narratives of their impacts. Although these are valuable to capture, and reveal girls' innovative understandings of impacts, the literature misses a broader analysis of the contributions that girls have made to social change that would be visible with larger-scale and longitudinal methods.

Given these constraints, it is possible that examples of success lie in reports that are not methodologically rigorous, which speaks more to problems of documenting impacts rather than the efficacy of girls' movements. Of the 40 sources reviewed, the rigorous academic articles are more likely to be framed around a particular theoretical concept or analysis rather than aiming to document impacts. Whereas impact evaluations are methodologically rigorous, these are usually tied to donor-funded projects, and we found none that looked at girls' contributions to social movements. These methodological issues mean that the evidence base is incipient.

Value of personal empowerment versus policy goals

While girls have contributed to impacts on policy, laws, and social norm change, they have also had more direct impacts, on their own lives, their communities, and how girls are perceived by others. Impacts are not separate (Vestergren et al., 2017): personal empowerment can lead to norm change through role-modelling and a ripple effect, and policy and legal change have a reciprocal relationship with norm change. Self-esteem and empowerment are important effects of participating in activism (ibid.), and these seem especially pronounced for girls and young women.

Girls' limited influence on policy is a notable finding of our review. Girls frequently meet resistance from power-holders, displaying a lack of interest in their issues. However, even though girls may lack influence to change policy at such high-level events, it can mean that issues are raised where they might not previously have been, and that girls are developing confidence and leadership skills through their attendance (Plan International, 2022). However, the literature highlights that girls' ambitions to influence policy are often unrealised, predominantly on account of girls' structural and cultural positioning as 'junior', and therefore perceived as less knowledgeable and less capable than adult (often male) policy-makers.

Limited evidence on effectiveness of resourcing modalities

The use of core versus project funding is often discussed in the literature, although rarely with a view to the comparative efficacy or impacts of each. Drawing on lessons learned from funders and evidence from girls' outcomes, the literature suggests that flexible funding without a project agenda allows groups to remain independent, work for long-term change, and provides space for organisational and personal growth (Djordjevic, 2022).

While there is no strong evidence to suggest that core funding improves the effectiveness of girls' movements, demand for such funding is high within the literature on account of it facilitating girls' empowerment and supporting them to engage as agents of change.

The literature also shows that non-financial resourcing has important movement-building impacts as well as contributing to movement goals. Capacity-building for girls might lead to policy-influencing success, by improving girls' ability to present their issues and create advocacy strategies. Networking and alliance-building, when viewed as types of resourcing, are important sources of strength and make it more likely that girls' organising will achieve their goals. In some cases, adult mentorship has 'opened doors' for girls to achieve policy-influencing success. Although the literature does not show how different resourcing modalities lead to impacts, there is promising documentation that investing in girls' capacities and strengthening connections to wider feminist movements help girls become successful activists and achieve desired change in their communities. Developing girls' skills, increasing their empowerment, and supporting them as leaders through financial and non-financial resources are the building blocks of creating successful movements.

Since girls' movements tend to focus on change at the community level, and on topics directly related to girls' autonomy and rights (such as sexual and reproductive health and rights), it is important to remember that resourcing must also be directed to the areas that girls' movements cannot address alone. These include structural challenges such as the quality of education and healthcare, wider economic conditions, climate change and infrastructure. Girls' movements can advocate within these areas, but funders should be wary of placing the burden of change on girls' movements alone, and must also engage with the wider ecosystem for gender equality and social change.

Adolescent girls in sewing centre, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh
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Conclusion and summary of evidence gaps

This review has examined a set of literature based on robust evidence about resourcing and impact of girls' movements. It shows that there are significant gaps in understanding what kinds of impacts girls' movements have, and how they are achieved. There is evidence that girls' movements have impacts, often on personal empowerment, community improvements, social norm change, policy changes, and in building the recognition of girls as civil society actors in their own right. However, this is clearly an emerging field and not yet well-evidenced.

The following major evidence gaps are notable.

1. Limited robust implementation research that pays attention to the impacts of girls' movements

Analyses of the impact pathways yielded by girls' movements do not adopt rigorous or reliable methods, and there are no impact evaluations (that the authors are aware of) of girls' movements. Research is often conducted by researcher-activists and academics who are themselves invested in the movements.

Nor does the evidence base present an analysis of causality, or a comprehensive understanding of the activities, sectors or modalities that have the most impact – however small- or large-scale this may be, and whether impacts are personal or population-wide. The literature does not elicit the conditions or pathways for successes of girls' movements.

For these reasons, the field would benefit from thought-leadership in partnership with girls and donors to construct an independent evaluation, inclusive of implementation research, to yield a wider-scale analysis of what girls' movements achieve than currently exists.

2. Limited attention to the diversity of girls and what this means for their engagement in collective action

There is little understanding of how impacts are distributed according to geography, education, stage of adolescence (e.g. very young adolescents (10-24 years) or older adolescents), ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Relatedly, there is little analysis of whether and how girls' movements have different impacts on different age cohorts, especially younger girls.

In particular, future funding to intermediaries who are funding girls' movements would benefit from including budget lines to carefully monitor, using rigorous methods, the multiple forms of impact that girls achieve.

Young girls playing in Afar, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

3. Limited attention to literature in different languages to capture learning from a broader range of contexts

The evidence base would benefit from a review that includes languages other than English, especially Portuguese and Spanish, to capture girls' leadership in social movements in Latin America, French, for movements in Francophone African countries and elsewhere, and Arabic for movements in the Middle East.

4. Limited attention to conceptualising what collective action looks like in humanitarian and crisis contexts

There is a lack of evidence on impacts of girls' movements in humanitarian and crisis contexts (Jochim et al., 2021), and in exploring what collective action looks like in such settings. There is also very little disaggregation between low- and middle-income country contexts.

5. Limited attention to how digital activism is resourced

The literature highlights the increasing use of digital methods, especially by young people, but there is scant attention to how digital activism might be resourced compared with other kinds of campaigns and collective action.

A 16-year-old girl in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

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Annex 1: Literature included in the review

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About GAGE

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a decade-long (2016-2026) longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit www.gage.odi.org for more information.

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