



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

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Updated with new data

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The international community is confronting unprecedented crises, which are being met by the unprecedented mobilization of youth at all levels. This is particularly true in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), where young people have become potent catalysts and persuasive advocates for the changes that most require their energy and creativity to help achieve. Yet female and male adolescents and youth articulate radically different motivations, needs, and experiences with regard to their participation and leadership in SRHR efforts.

Young women report a range of gender-specific challenges that compromise their SRHR leadership trajectories, leaving them disadvantaged and at risk. Larger social and structural inequalities combine with inhospitable working environments and the looming threat of violence and coercion to limit the impact of young female leaders. These problems are unusually severe for young women working in SRHR—as they face not only the double burden of being young and female, but also the additional stigma associated with speaking openly about sexuality and sexual health. If anything, there has been negative progress: The world's response to COVID-19 is exacerbating long-standing issues by worsening the overall climate for SRHR and further disadvantaging young women, who struggle to find either safety or productivity as they shelter from the pandemic.

In an effort to shed light on the experiences, perspectives, and impact of young female leaders in adolescent and youth SRHR, the Youth Investment, Engagement, and Leadership Development (YIELD) Project is giving voice to female advocates. In so doing, it is also unavoidably neglecting a number of equally important dimensions—including those related to sexuality, alternative gender identities, and race. Both young people of color and young people identifying as LGBTQA have unique experiences to relate, as well as unique challenges to overcome—and more targeted research is clearly required to deepen our understanding of how these populations struggle, survive, and thrive in the world of SRHR work.

For now, though, the YIELD Project is highlighting young female leaders—almost all of whom have multiple stories of gender-based discrimination, coercion, and violence to share. Almost none of these leaders can identify any policies, structures, or systems in place to protect them. These findings are supported by quantitative data gathered by the project, which suggest that female advocates are systematically disadvantaged in relation to their male peers. This is particularly inexcusable in a field devoted to promoting human rights, gender equity, and the health of women and girls.

What can we do to empower and support young women, and level the playing field for female participants and leaders in SRHR efforts? YIELD research informs the following suggestions for how to combat gender inequality and bring about positive change:

- **Find and equip** diverse populations of young women by involving them in the full program life cycle, providing successive opportunities for professional advancement, and developing more inclusive and sustainable leadership pipelines.
- **Enable young female leaders** by transforming gender norms; cultivating gender-equitable organizations and organizational cultures; establishing and implementing responsive safeguarding policies; mainstreaming female leadership; and adequately compensating and resourcing young women and their organizations.
- **Connect** young women to each other, and to ongoing professional opportunities, by formalizing female support networks.
- **Track** the gendered experiences, perceptions, and impacts of young women working in SRHR, with particular attention to how gender disparities operate in local contexts and affect underserved populations.

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

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

INTRODUCTION

There are more young people today than at any point in human history. They are passionate, engaged, committed—and ready to effect transformative change in their local and global communities. But these young people also face complex and intractable problems, the likes of which have confronted no other generation. On the list: accelerating climate change, worsening income inequality, ongoing race- and gender-based violence—and now COVID-19, a global pandemic that is exacerbating existing health disparities and disproportionately harming the world’s most underserved populations. Increasingly conservative and undemocratic governments are of little help. Still, hope can be found in the young, who have responded to these crises by mobilizing peers and adult allies, and catalyzing large-scale movements for change.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are under particular attack, making youth leadership in SRHR programming, advocacy, and research particularly important. Young women are poised to act as the drivers of change in these areas—as they have unique experiences, perspectives, and insights to share. But they also face challenges to participation and leadership in SRHR that their male peers do not. Inequitable norms, inhospitable professional environments, and the looming specter of gender-based violence limit opportunities for young women everywhere. And for those growing up in traditional societies and vulnerable communities, these constraints are more oppressive—making the need to empower and support young women more urgent.

Recent research conducted by the Youth Investment, Engagement, and Leadership Development (YIELD) Project suggests that gender imbalances may be acute in the field of adolescent and youth SRHR—where female and male youth leaders report different experiences working as advocates and champions. YIELD research found that—in comparison to young men—young women are more likely to be motivated by negative personal experiences, more likely to face ongoing safety and security risks, and also more likely to consider their participation in SRHR a “passion” rather than a “career.” Perhaps related to this, young men seem better able to leverage their participation into additional professional opportunities, higher leadership roles, and better pay. The gender differences are both stark and unacceptable in a field committed to the health and empowerment of girls and young women.

What can we do—as a field and as a community—to address these imbalances? There are obviously larger cultural factors at work here, which can make these problems seem unsolvable. But this is not just about changing norms: The presence of systematic discrimination and ongoing workplace violence, at all levels, means that institutional interventions are both possible and necessary. Recent public testimonials from young women active in the field reinforce the idea that even organizations committed to female empowerment can do more to support female advocates, particularly young women of color. However, the flip side of this is both hopeful and positive, as it suggests that institutional interventions have the potential to favorably impact both female leadership and female health.

This issue paper highlights the burdens that young women bear, and the constraints that they face, while also spotlighting solutions. By giving voice to female participants and leaders in SRHR—honoring their experiences and taking seriously *their* proposed solutions—we hope to move the field to a more inclusive and equitable place.

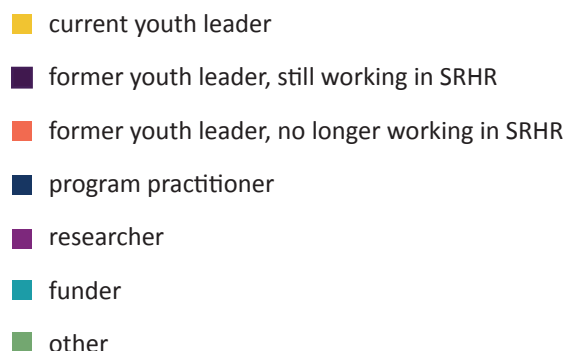
The YIELD Project. The YIELD Project provides field-informed guidance for future action and investment in youth participation and leadership development to advance young people’s sexual and reproductive health and rights. The YIELD Project is guided by a steering committee comprised of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The Summit Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. As part of this work, the YIELD Project team has conducted comprehensive literature reviews and program scans, as well as over 100 in-depth interviews with young leaders, youth-led organizations, youth-serving organizations, researchers, and funders. The findings from the first phase of YIELD activity can be found [here](#).

Research on gender. Early YIELD research revealed many of the reported differences in male and female participation and leadership experiences cited above. To drill down further on the issue of gender, the project team also conducted 17 additional key-informant interviews, 11 of which were with female youth leaders currently working in the field. These interviews accessed respondents from multiple geographical regions, including Africa (seven informants from Ethiopia,

Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe); the Americas and the Caribbean (five informants from Dominica, Honduras, Mexico, and the United States); South Asia (four informants from India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka); and the United Kingdom (one informant). Eight of the interviews took place from September 2018-April 2019, after which the team fielded a large mixed-methods survey with a diverse range of SRHR stakeholders. This survey—which was intended to balance and contextualize the qualitative dataset—was distributed via link to a pre-existing YIELD listserv, then forwarded widely, making the exact response rate difficult to ascertain. Overall, the survey garnered a total of 144 responses from a cross-section of youth leaders, adult practitioners, and researchers active in the field (see demographic breakdowns in Figures 1 and 2, below).

FIGURE 1

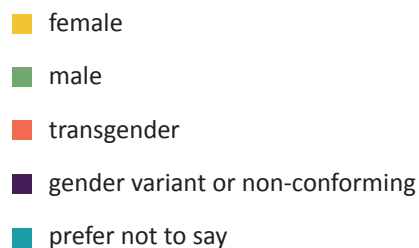
What role do you occupy in your adolescent and youth SRHR work?



*number of respondents from a survey group of 141 participants; single response required

FIGURE 2

How would you describe your gender identity?



*number of respondents from a survey group of 143 participants; single response required

The project team used data from this survey to inform a second round of nine key-informant interviews, which was conducted from December 2019-June 2020. All qualitative data were then coded and analyzed using Dedoose, a collaborative web-based software that facilitates mixed-methods analysis. The first step in this analysis was the development of a comprehensive codebook, which included 22 codes in seven thematic categories. These codes were then systematically applied to the transcripts from all interviews, after which the data was analyzed thematically, beginning with the code co-occurrences identified by Dedoose. The findings contained in this report are a synthesis of the entire quantitative and qualitative dataset; however, the excerpted quotations included below have been deliberately selected to highlight the perspectives of both current and former female youth leaders. These quotations are representative, but individual respondents are not identified out of concern for the sensitive topics being discussed.

Limitations. This study was not designed to provide a comprehensive picture of how gender impacts youth participation and leadership in SRHR work. The project team’s research in this area focused narrowly on young female advocates, in an attempt to give voice to their struggles, experiences, insights, and perspectives. The result is a study that fails to capture a number of other critical dimensions—including those related to sexuality, alternative gender identities, and race. This is significant, as large bodies of related evidence suggest that both young people of color and young people identifying as LGBTQA have unique experiences to relate, as well as unique challenges to overcome. While the project team made an effort to interview a diverse cross-section of SRHR stakeholders, these stakeholders were not asked targeted questions on the above topics. Additionally, it should be noted that though male stakeholders were interviewed, the study largely fails to capture the experiences of young male advocates, who are also constrained by gender dynamics in both their activism and their day-to-day lives. Furthermore, while we made an effort to speak with young people from diverse backgrounds and geographies, our sample remains opportunistic. The paper also presents the views of these informants without verifying any substantive claims made during the interview process. As such, our findings offer a snapshot of gender dynamics currently operating in the field, rather than clearly generalizable results. However, even this glimpse into the experiences and perspectives of young women in SRHR provides a critical and compelling vision of how to propel the field—and the world—into a more equitable future.

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

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

UNEQUAL: THE DOUBLE BURDEN OF BEING YOUNG AND FEMALE

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

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

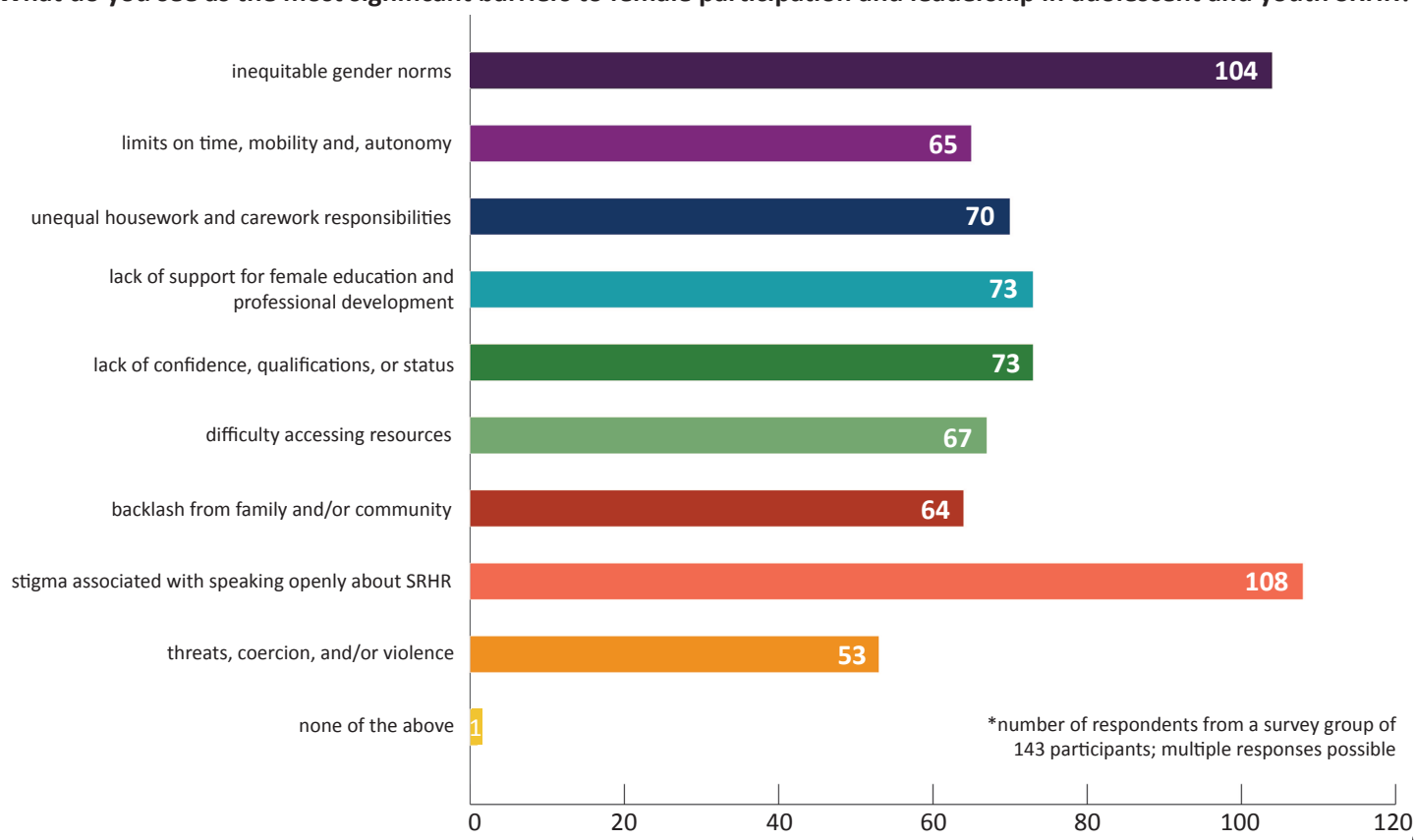
“We have to take into account how, culturally, SRHR or just sex is viewed as taboo, especially for women to talk about. Or argue about or support. For me, my experience has been that I’ve gone into spaces where certain things can be said by my male counterparts, and won’t be frowned upon. But if I say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

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

YIELD survey data suggest that this takes its toll: Over 70% of survey respondents cited both inequitable gender norms and the stigma associated with speaking openly about SRHR as among the most significant barriers to female participation and leadership in the field. Close to 50% of respondents reported observing or encountering these barriers in their own work. Nor was this all: Other associated barriers—like backlash from families and communities, unequal housework and carework responsibilities, and limits on time and mobility—were also considered significant constraints on young female leaders. (See Figure 3, below.)

FIGURE 3

What do you see as the most significant barriers to female participation and leadership in adolescent and youth SRHR?



We cannot empower young women without addressing these larger social and structural barriers. We have no wish to dwell on these constraints, or to re-victimize girls and young women by emphasizing their powerlessness. But the fact remains that empowering young female leaders will require us to dismantle these larger social and structural barriers. Part of this starts with the individual young woman—building her capacity, encouraging her participation, and cultivating her leadership. Part of it can only be done in partnership with gatekeepers, who mediate many aspects of young women’s lives. These gatekeepers include parents, caregivers, and other family members; “duty bearers” like teachers and religious leaders; and men and boys. Often part of the problem, these gatekeepers have the potential to become part of the solution. This potential cannot be realized, though, without intentional efforts to transform gender norms in more equitable ways (see “Enable,” on pg. 15).

“I started as a volunteer, when I was about 15. Throughout that I learned and first encountered what it was like to be an unpaid volunteer, who was doing a lot of work, and who was a young woman at the time, so who also had to take different precautions than my male volunteer colleagues. There were just a lot of extra restrictions. I think it was very much well-intentioned. But girls, and adolescent girls volunteering for that organization, had to pretty much stick with each other, given the machista and patriarchal societies we worked in as volunteers. A lot of our male volunteer colleagues could go out at night, and play soccer, and do all of these other things, but our host families would advise us to stay in. [Because] the best way to stay safe was to stay at home.”

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

UNFAIR: THE SPECIFIC OBSTACLES THAT FEMALE YOUTH LEADERS FACE

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

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

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

“Men within these spaces—it could be men our age or men older than us—feel like they deserve certain things because they are men. And I think that also slows down progress, and even the quality of advocacy that young women do in these spaces. And not being able to see as many female advocates as there should be—that makes us dwell in this mentality that certain advocacy opportunities are for men, and certain are for women. But also, depending on the nature and the structure of certain organizations and the spaces that you work in, the issue of balancing, between who works and who does what within the organization, is another problem. Because if you work under an organization whose structure is actually full of men, it kind of makes you feel that certain things are supposed to be done by men, and not women. And that too affects how women take part or take up opportunities in these spaces.”

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

Again, this takes a measurable toll: A clear majority of YIELD survey respondents reported that young female advocates are disadvantaged relative to young male advocates. Only 20% of respondents felt that young women advance in the field at the same rate as young men, and only 22% felt that young women are given the same opportunities for professional development. The difference also extends to compensation—with only 22% of respondents perceiving young women to be equally compensated for their SRHR work in comparison to young men. This has serious ripple effects: Several stakeholders with whom we spoke saw these as critical, make-or-break issues that—combined with the broad lack of institutional supports—are responsible for forcing both younger and older women out of the field.

“Young women don’t get the opportunities that young men get. Even as advocates or in any position, they tend to raise men higher than women. Women are more passionate, but men become the face of the cause.”

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

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

According to our informants, young men are better at “talking the talk,” even if it’s often young women who are “walking the walk”—and this, too, both reflects and contributes to a vicious cycle of gender inequality in the SRHR workplace. All the stakeholders with whom we spoke were vocal in their respect and appreciation for young male advocates, and empirical data on the relative contributions of male and female leaders is difficult to obtain. Still, the gender imbalances cited above mean that young men are far more confident—and better equipped to promote themselves and their work—than their female peers. Some of the young female leaders with whom we spoke see the male paradigm of confident self-promotion—what one of our informants referred to as “talking the talk”—as something that young women should strive to emulate in their professional lives. Others feel that the male model is too aggressive, and that the system needs to be re-configured to support women who may not be vocal in their own praise, but who are on the ground, “walking the walk,” in ways that their male colleagues may not be.

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

“Our [male youth leaders] are not shy about asking for professional opportunities beyond their volunteer positions. In one particular case, [a male volunteer] went up to the director of this organization we partner with—which he wasn’t supposed to do—he went into her office, and was like, hey, this is who I am, this is what we’re doing downstairs, I just wanted to know if you had any opportunities for jobs. Just so bold, had the audacity to do this. Or another [male youth leader] emailed one of our donors. When we communicate with our donors, we communicate very intentionally, and it’s usually a group effort. But this guy sent an email, poorly written, and was like, hey, can you fund me to go to Women Deliver? Just the audacity I see in some of these men. Young men. Who are leaders in this field. It’s not even supporting girls and young women. There are these structures and cultures that are set up that have allowed men to think it’s OK to dominate. And I don’t know how to combat that. Because it’s not just women. We have strong women; we have women who are vocal. But they’re polite. And women know their space. But men are pushy, and will keep harassing you until they get what they want. And it works. That’s how men are moving up in this world, and building careers in this space, whereas women are not.”

These shifts in emphasis aside, our informants were unanimous in their belief that differences in confidence, qualifications, work patterns, and self-promotion are creating severe gender imbalances—both in current compensation and access to future opportunities. The cycle is, once again, self-fulfilling: As male youth leaders advance, and female youth leaders lag behind, these gaps in resume and accomplishment compound each other—radically limiting the ability of young women to succeed or support themselves with their SRHR work. Unfortunately, the fact that young women are often the backbone of youth-led and youth-serving organizations—in part because of their reluctance to take time off to pursue professional development opportunities (for fear of either harming the institution or shifting the burden of their work onto colleagues)—rarely seems to matter. Altering these dynamics is the next frontier of empowerment work, just as strategies for better compensating and rewarding young female leaders are rapidly becoming benchmarks of equitable practice (see “Enable,” on pg. 15).

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

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

“We’re not giving women many choices when there aren’t alternatives. In order to have spaces that are more supportive of girls’ and young women’s participation and leadership, you need to have other structures in place to support their lives.”

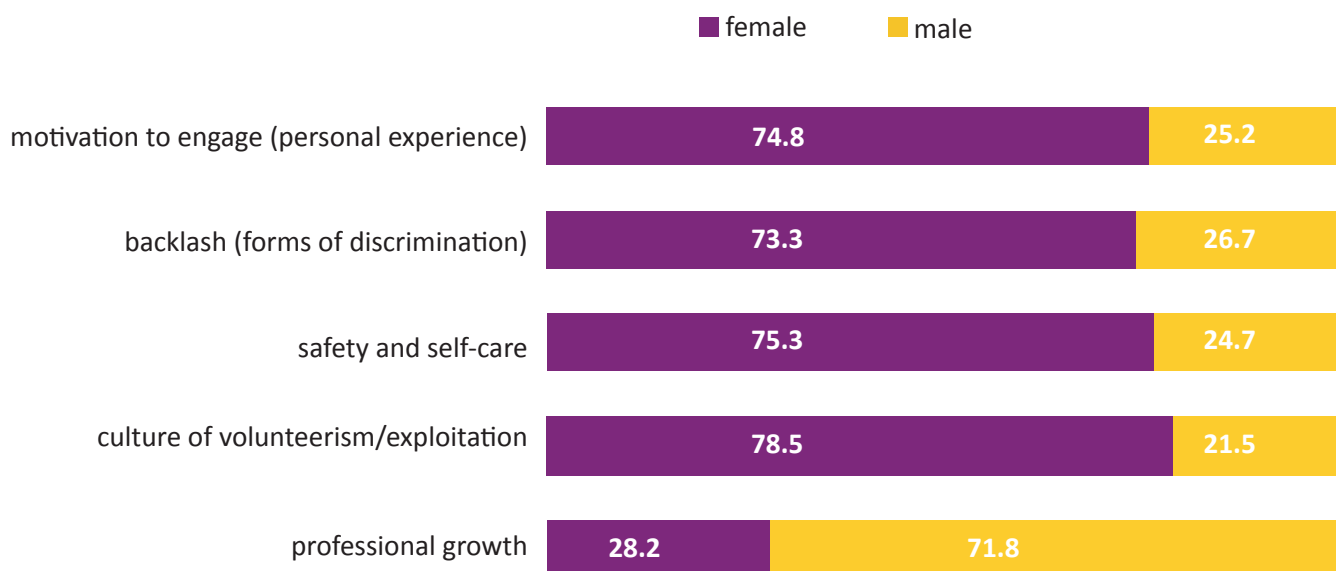
A DEEPER DIVE INTO THE QUALITATIVE DATA

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

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

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

CODE APPLICATIONS, BROKEN DOWN BY GENDER



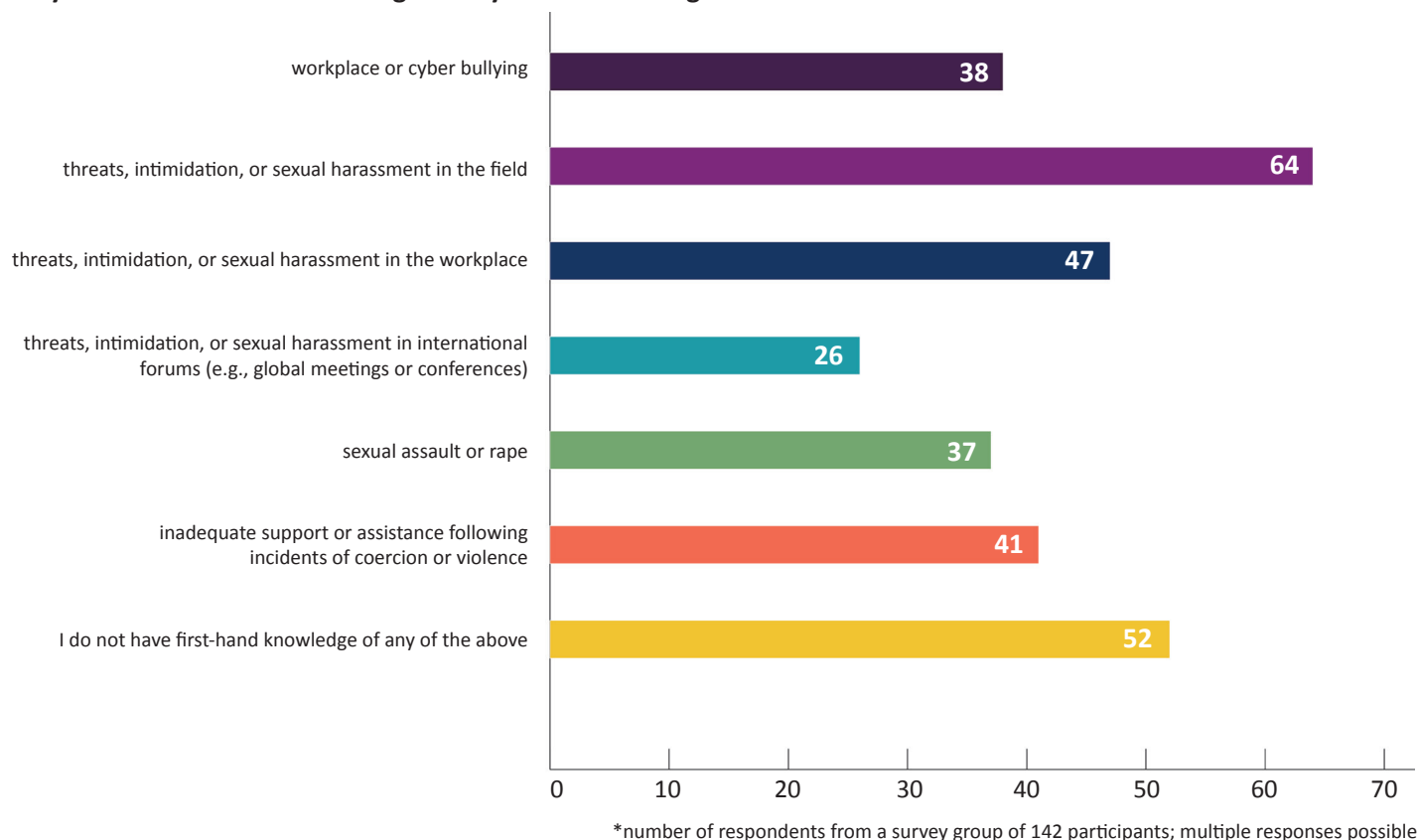
UNSAFE: THE COERCION AND VIOLENCE THAT FEMALE YOUTH LEADERS EXPERIENCE

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

Young women face widespread violence and coercion in multiple professional contexts—and are poorly supported in the aftermath of these incidents. YIELD survey data suggest that girls and young women are exposed to a wide range of threats as a result of their SRHR work (see Figure 4). Equally troubling, only 37% of survey respondents had no first-hand knowledge of any form of threat or coercion—suggesting that incidence rates are likely high across the field. Unfortunately, the qualitative data we gathered over the course of the project further reinforced this claim. The young female leaders with whom we spoke described specific incidents of violence and coercion—ranging from workplace and cyber bullying to sexual harassment at international conferences. Several of these young women expressed disappointment at the lack of support they received from supervisors and supervisory organizations. None had undergone protective training, and few were aware of the existence of any policies or reporting systems in place to protect them.

FIGURE 4

Girls and young women are often exposed to threats as a result of their adolescent and youth SRHR work.
Do you have first-hand knowledge of any of the following?



Many smaller organizations do not have clear safeguarding policies; many larger organizations require young women to cut through so much red tape that the process can become re-victimizing. (Or this, at least, is the perception of the young female advocates we interviewed, as it was beyond the scope of this paper to undertake an independent review of organizational safeguarding policies.) That said, the perception aligns with YIELD survey data: While roughly 65% of respondents reported that their organizations have gender safeguarding policies in place, only 43% felt that the policies are effective. Furthermore, these percentages were subject to heavy effect modification by gender, meaning that male respondents were more likely to view safeguarding policies as effective than their female peers.

These stories are difficult to hear. We spotlight them here to raise awareness and provide necessary context for our subsequent discussion of more effective safeguarding strategies (see “Enable,” on pg. 15).

“I literally received death threats working in a Garifuna community on SRHR issues. We were doing a training with girls and the elders considered that we were encouraging the girls to be promiscuous. There was no safeguarding policy or protocol in place.”

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

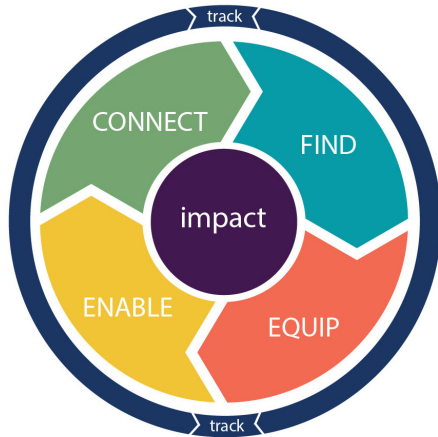
“There was this time when I was working in a far-away place in India. And there was a person who was reporting to me, who assaulted me sexually. And my boss was a woman, and when I talked to her about it—and the thing is [the perpetrator] was amongst his colleagues, and they were making fun of me for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

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

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD: AN EXPLORATION OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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

Youth Participation Process Map



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

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

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

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

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

FIND & EQUIP

A critical way to identify and engage girls and young women as participants in the SRHR ecosystem—and build their knowledge, skills, and capabilities so that they become leaders in the field—is to involve young women in the full program life cycle. By reaching out to existing groups of young women—and leveraging their knowledge of local needs to identify underserved populations and shape flexible, responsive programming—we can create participation and leadership opportunities for more diverse cross-sections of the population. We can also cultivate deeper, broader, and more sustainable pipelines of young female leaders, while adapting our training programs to better respond to the specific barriers that these leaders face. An essential part of this will be providing successive opportunities for development and advancement, including capacity building that spans multiple organizational domains.

The best way to find and equip young women is to involve them in what we do. Virtually all of our respondents called for greater inclusion of young women in the design and implementation of programming. This would mean the development of more effective recruitment and referral processes, as well as the cultivation of more inclusive and sustainable pipelines of young female leaders. Relevant strategies might include outreach to existing groups of young women, as a means of identifying hard-to-reach populations within local communities; formative research with these same groups, prior to the development of programming; greater inclusion of young women in program design and delivery; expanded roles for female graduates as they age up into positions of greater programmatic or institutional responsibility; and the mainstreaming of young women’s leadership within organizations. Some of this will be discussed in more detail below (see “Enable,” on pg. 15, and “Connect & Track,” on pg. 21)—and the specifics of what needs to be done will vary by context. But this does not diminish the importance of the broader task: Involving young women in this way is crucial to the identification, engagement, and empowerment of young female leaders.

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

We cannot effectively empower young women—by building their capacities, responding flexibly to their context-specific needs, serving their evolving interests, or cultivating their leadership—without including them in the processes by which we do this. This type of involvement cannot simply be tokenistic. Not only does the tokenistic involvement of young people tend to privilege men, who find it easier to advance in SRHR, but it also privileges elite cross-sections of the population. This, in turn, limits the potential for both youth contributions and youth impact. Multiple stakeholders cautioned that engaging young women in meaningful ways requires non-trivial investments of time, effort, and resources. But these respondents were also unanimous in asserting the necessity of doing this, given the field’s larger investment in equity.

“Tokenism, in my head, is somewhat synonymous with having a lot of young male advocates attending. Because when we’re not very intentional—like a lot of us have seen in a lot of organizations, including my own—the intention is there, right? We want to create a lot of opportunities, but then the easy wins, or the low-hanging fruits, are creating spaces, and the spaces are occupied by young men, because they have more mobility and more access, and the power and gender norms are there for them to participate. So, when you scratch the surface, I can see exactly why we have so many young male colleagues—who are bright, and wonderful, and I very much appreciate them—but sort of understanding that this didn’t just happen. It happened very intentionally. Because we didn’t create systems and processes and structures that create intentional and equitable access to opportunities.”

Providing successive opportunities for development and advancement is a key part of empowering young female leaders. The deficits in confidence, qualifications, and status already discussed suggest that effectively capacitating young women is an iterative process. Young female advocates should be trained in many different organizational domains—including program design, project management, financial planning, grant-writing, and research—while also being provided with successive opportunities for professional advancement. An existing body of related research suggests that many small, grassroots organizations already meaningfully involve girls and young women in all aspects of the program life cycle, from design and delivery to evaluation and scale. As their confidence and capacities rise, the young women in these programs are given expanding roles within their home institutions, and encouraged to pursue additional opportunities for professional development. This means that female leadership pipelines are baked right in—to the clear benefit of not only young women, but also programs and organizations.

“When training girls and young women, we try to take an incremental approach. As you increase their confidence, you introduce more responsibility.”

Examples abound. **Girls Legacy, in Zimbabwe**, equips young women to become advocates in their local communities by giving them leadership roles in female-directed clubs; these clubs forge lasting relationships with girls and young women that extend from puberty through older adolescence. **BRAVE, in South Africa**, cultivates a similar sense of “permanent belonging” by allowing very young adolescent girls multiple entry points into the program, and giving “senior girls” increasing influence over program design and implementation. And **GoJoven** is actively attempting to evolve its larger global program into a number of independent local organizations, most of which are currently being led by female alums. These alums receive ongoing financial and technical support throughout the process, as part of GoJoven’s larger push to provide seed money to new youth projects.

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

Over time, the young women in these programs—and many others like them—develop the skills and confidence necessary to become change agents in their local communities. The impact of this development is already clear in current SRHR work: Nearly all the young female leaders with whom we spoke rose to their current positions through precisely the type of successive development pipelines described above. This is not accidental; rather, it is the direct result of deep and intentional investments in a talented cohort of girls and young women. Furthermore, it is equally important to note that—though not all organizations will be capable of providing this kind of support in isolation—aligning SRHR organizations around the same goal would be a clear and effective way of sustaining robust pipelines of young female leaders.

“We need to get creative about how our movement creates pipelines, versus how one institution creates a pipeline.”

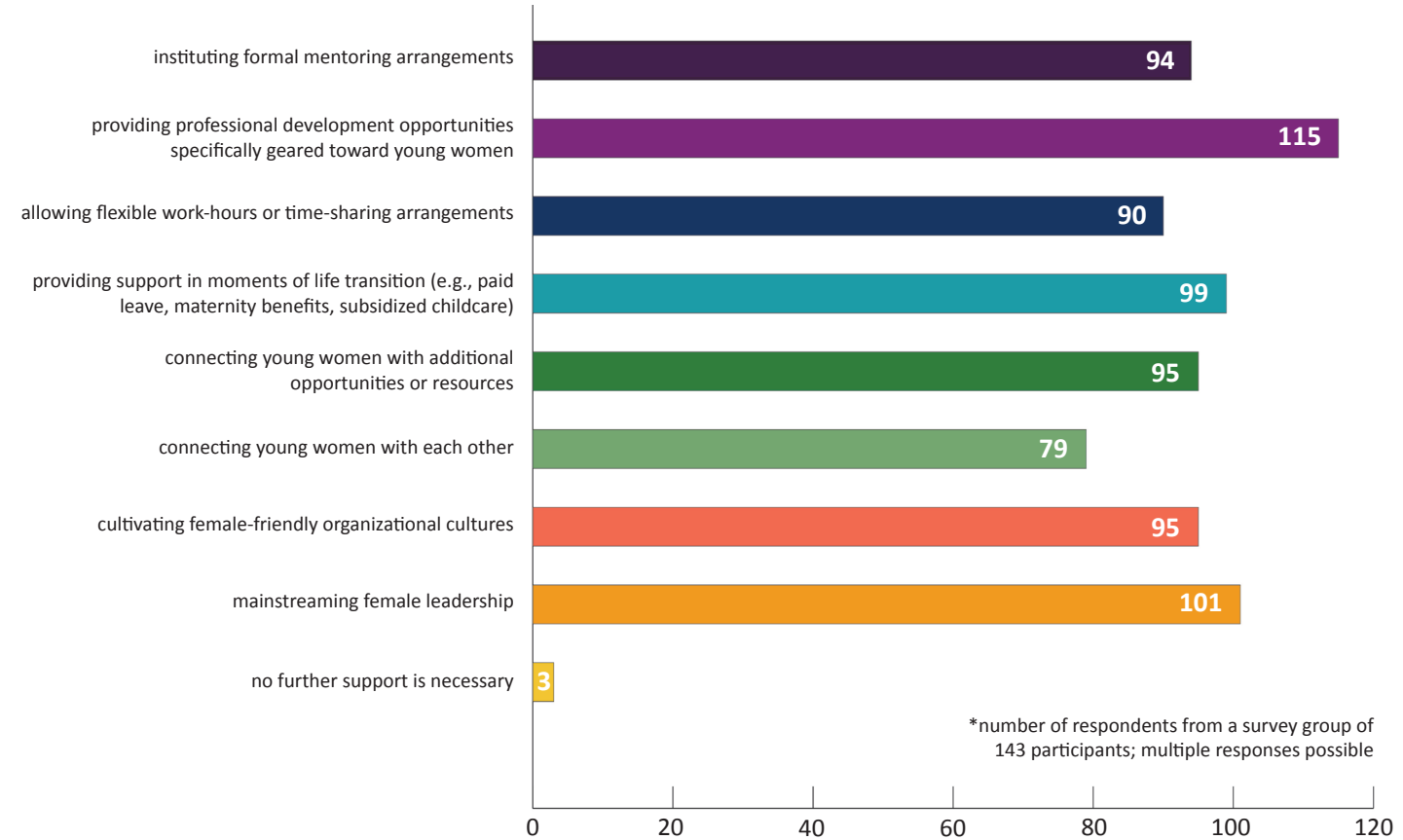
ENABLE

In order to enable young women to act as contributors and leaders in SRHR, we must do more than capacitate them, even in effective and iterative ways. We must also tackle five interrelated tasks: the transformation of gender norms; the cultivation of gender-equitable organizations and organizational cultures; the establishment and implementation of responsive safeguarding policies; the mainstreaming of female leadership; and the adequate compensation and resourcing of young women and their organizations.

All of these tasks are essential aspects of creating enabling environments in which young women can both contribute and succeed—and institutions have a huge role to play here. The raw numbers support this: Only 30% of YIELD survey respondents reported that young women are being adequately supported by their organizations, and less than 1% believed no further supports to be necessary. This suggests that significant progress is required in a number of overlapping domains (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5

What should organizations be doing to support young women?



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

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

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

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

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

Young women will never reach their true potential as advocates and champions in SRHR if we do not do more to cultivate gender-equitable organizations and organizational cultures. This means establishing and implementing institutional policies and practices that directly address gender inequality and how it plays out in organizations (e.g., in leadership dynamics, systems of support and promotion)—and that help young women manage life transitions, balance carework responsibilities, and achieve ongoing professional development. Possible strategies include, but are not limited to, instituting formal mentoring arrangements (discussed in more detail below, in “Connect & Track,” on pg. 21); providing explicit professional development opportunities, specifically geared toward young women in their availability and content

(discussed above, under “Find & Equip,” on page. 13); undertaking larger institutional capacity-building efforts, particularly in areas like compensation, work-life balance, and gender discrimination/violence; allowing flexible work hours or time-sharing arrangements; managing burnout; and providing paid parental leave, maternity benefits, or subsidized childcare. These are, in a sense, the minimum supports necessary to promote inclusivity. But the larger goal should be to transform organizational cultures—and commit to supporting young women, from a young age onwards, as they manage the gendered demands of their personal and professional lives.

“The nature of our work is not so cyclical as one would think. Things are always happening, everything is always urgent, one way or the other. You tend to fall into the trap of saying, yes, I’ll always be available, and it becomes really difficult for you to create any kind of work-life balance. We need paid parental leave that is comprehensive and very much looked-to as the standard—[as well as] the expectation of having flexible and remote-work options available for everyone, and not just individuals who have favorable bosses. [It would also really help to] have someone on your team, whether it’s your supervisor or someone else, to explain and help you figure out where you want to go, and what’s your next career path, and how to get there—but not in a way that there’s this expectation that the only way to move up in an organization is just to be accessible all the time, and do all the work, and just take it on. I feel like that expectation disproportionately affects young women, and women in general.”

“My job is very demanding and high pressure. I work long hours and there is a lot of stress and emotional tax with no systemic support structures in place. And then I have to go home and take care of most of the domestic work load. And the COVID-19 situation is actually making our situations worse. Now there is literally no end to the workday—there are virtual commitments all day and often into the night. And we are at home trying to take care of our families, or trying to study. We need greater flexibility in our days to fit our work around other needs and interests. And, of course, we need more reasonable workloads and better support, both in the office and at home.”

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

“Programs of all kinds and across sectors need strong policies that foster gender equality in the workplace—policies to address gender discrimination, ensure equal pay and opportunities for promotion, prevent and respond to gender violence. [Our organization] does not have a gender policy—we need one! We can’t assume we are doing equitable work just because of the subject matter. And most importantly, these policies need to be practically implemented! We have worked tirelessly on gender policies at different levels, but they are papel mojado [wet paper]. Nothing is implemented.”

“The first step is looking at equity. And looking at the structural barriers within our institutions—so things like our policies, our hiring standards, our pay grades, our job descriptions and minimum requirements. And going one by one, and asking how is this inclusive or supportive of adolescent girls and young women, in particular—for them to participate and be part of what we do? And if the answer is, it’s not inclusive, then you say, how are we going to fix this? And in my mind, the best way to do that is to ask people. To ask adolescent girls and young women, on a basic level, what would help you participate? What would help? And at the structural level, working with youth-led organizations, and creating more actual partnerships between youth-led and youth-serving organizations. And as much as I love statements, and I do—this needs to become more actionable. Organizations need to take action, and commit to looking at this in a meaningful way. And in some ways, it’s saying, hey, maybe we won’t be able to reach our end-goal in two years, but if we can create 2-3 actions in the next two years . . . I think it starts at that level, in creating waves and movements within our own institutions.”

A crucial part of enabling young women is keeping them safe. Given the violence and coercion that young female leaders experience in their working lives, it is clear that we need to better protect girls and young women. This means more effectively managing threats. Our young female respondents spoke repeatedly of the need to institute more explicit, effective, and responsive organizational safeguarding policies that include formal reporting and support systems. Furthermore, both the quantitative and the qualitative data suggest that many young women are unaware of the existence of any policies or procedures in place to protect them, or any mechanisms by which they could seek redress in the aftermath of incidents of gender-based violence. (See Figure 4, above.) Most fledgling, youth-led organizations do not have policies, procedures, or systems of this kind; many larger organizations re-victimize young women by requiring them to cut through too much red tape. Formal safeguarding policies, reporting mechanisms, and support systems are equally necessary in environments like international conferences, where the incidence of sexual harassment is high. Our training in this area is also weak: Young women are not being adequately equipped to recognize and respond to workplace threats, and young men are not being adequately trained to recognize and overcome the biases and assumptions that permit them to perpetrate discrimination and violence. Our training and organizational systems need to be strengthened if we are to stop gender-based violence in the world of SRHR work.

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

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

Organizations will need support in doing this. According to our respondents, very few seem to be adequately protecting girls and young women by training them to recognize and respond to threats, adopting clear safeguarding policies, or providing adequate supports and mechanisms of redress in the aftermath of incidents. Youth-led organizations, in particular, may need help creating the kinds of institutional policies and structures necessary to effectively support girls and young women. Young women themselves will need to be involved here: The only way to bridge the gap between inadequate policies and unnecessarily rigid ones may be to co-design these policies with the populations they are intended to serve. That said, this is also an area where funders can play a significant role. By restricting the funds that flow to non-compliant organizations—or providing ongoing support for policy creation, organizational development, internal trainings, and periodic external reviews of effectiveness—they can give the “nudges” necessary to ensure that organizational cultures evolve in ways that protect and support young female leaders.

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

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

Another critical part of enabling young women is mainstreaming female leadership. Supporting young women also means mainstreaming female leadership. Many of our respondents believe that "if it is woman-led, that means it is woman-friendly"—and emphasize the importance of propelling women into power at all levels, including the highest echelons of leadership. The young female leaders with whom we spoke believe that women look at things differently—and have a more flexible, empathetic, and inclusive leadership style than their male peers. This, in turn, fosters stronger organizational cultures, more enduring organizations, and more support for girls and young women. Several respondents also felt strongly that women have the potential to respond better and achieve more, within SRHR in particular, because of their personal connection to the subject matter and related passion for the field. We have not done empirical research to support these claims—but the fact that all of our respondents share these basic perceptions suggests that young women feel more comfortable and supported in female-led organizations. This, combined with the role that female role models have in empowering girls and young women, hints at the ongoing value of supporting woman-led work.

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

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

"There's a different dynamic when you talk about power and women versus power and men. I think women look at power differently. And I think stronger teams are the result of female leadership and girl-led initiatives."

"In my [training cohort], we were three females and three males. The three females still work on SRHR. The males have all moved on to different professions that are unrelated. And they don't do anything in this space now, not even volunteer work. The investments made in the females have a higher return. I see women more committed—because we need to be. We need to keep fighting for our rights, while males already have them!"

We also need to fairly compensate young women for their work—and shift the funding paradigm to get more money into the hands of their organizations. All people have basic needs that must be met. In order to encourage female leadership in SRHR, it is necessary to better compensate young women's work. As previously noted, the ways that young women "walk the walk" rather than "talking the talk" often mean that they are poorly compensated in relation to their male

peers. This culture of behind-the-scenes volunteerism makes it difficult for young women to support themselves with their SRHR work—and limits the impact of that work by requiring them to split time and focus between multiple professional roles. It also excludes less elite young women from leadership positions in the sector. Organizations like **Asia Safe Abortion Partnership, in Sri Lanka**, compensate young women for their time; the **Young Women's Project** gives salaries to all of the young people on its staff, as part of its core commitment to equity. Providing this level of compensation, across SRHR initiatives, would take seriously the field's commitment to empowering young women and nurturing their leadership. And the converse is also true: Not providing fair and equitable compensation is a de facto decision to exclude promising young women from the field.

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

"Some organizations believe that voluntary is free. At the end of the day, humans have needs, and needs have to be met. You must be progressing in one way or another. So, if they're not providing capacity building, networking—you need to move in a direction. You can be passionate, but it becomes challenging if it is not benefiting you personally. It pushes advocates away."

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

"We're finding that when you ask an adolescent girl and boy to volunteer, oftentimes adolescent girls have more household chores, responsibilities, and duties. So, if they go home and say, hey, here's this volunteer activity, and I really want to participate—and there's no mechanisms to compensate for the fact that girls and women have more duties that are informal or unpaid or whatever you want to call it, and yet adolescent boys are given this freedom—girls and young women can't [participate]. And this is where, as organizations and communities, we really have to think about how we address and provide equitable mechanism to create that space, so that girls and young women can participate equally. And recognizing that sometimes that just takes extra money. And maybe it's not the most cost-effective way to reach X objective, but we do it because ultimately we're rights-based organizations, and we believe in human rights, and we believe in gender equality. So, we need to call that out, at the volunteer level, and through the staff and paid roles—every organization taking a stand and saying that they will do a gender-parity analysis, and look at it specifically from the perspective of young advocates, both male and female."

Another part of this is shifting the funding paradigm to get more money into the hands of young women's organizations. These organizations are chronically under-funded, and often have difficulty meeting the application requirements of traditional grant-making organizations. Registration, grant writing, and impact documentation can be particular barriers for young women in the philanthropic space. Organizations like **FRIDA: The Young Feminist Fund**, the **Girls First Fund**, and **CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality** are disrupting this paradigm, and distributing more funds to young women and their organizations. Youth-led organizations like the **International Youth Alliance for Family Planning** are also circumventing the system in productive ways by carrying the registration burden for smaller, grassroots groups, to which they directly disperse funds. But institutions like these are still few and far between, and the diversity of youth-led organizations suggests that meeting their evolving needs and capacities may require ongoing innovations in funding—including the direct involvement of both young men *and* young women in the funding process. Meanwhile, organizations led by young women remain starved for resources. This means that even relatively small infusions of funds would have a significant impact on the landscape of young women's organizations.

"In India, it's very hard to get registered. The process is a bureaucratic nightmare. I myself have faced this problem. The registration process and the paperwork—it's a nightmare. So, finding a way to fund non-registered organizations. There's a way to circumvent this. Like by reaching out to an organization that employs you. Or just

funding non-registered organizations and women-led movements. That would be very useful. And then identifying criteria—that you want to give funding to women-led organizations, for example, that work on women’s issues, or are run by under-30-year-old women. And have specific grants focused on that. Just give funding to ideas and let them grow into something. The person who is actually leading the intervention should have some background in SRHR. But if someone is trying to do something good in the community, just fund that. There is so much money in the world. And a little bit of that money could go to these women working in communities.”

CONNECT & TRACK

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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

YIELD research suggests that, in the field of SRHR, gender inequality is both pervasive and damaging. Almost all of the female leaders we interviewed have multiple stories of gender-based discrimination, coercion, and violence. Almost none can identify effective policies, structures, or systems in place to protect them. This is inexcusable—especially in a field devoted to promoting human rights, gender equality, and the health of women and girls. It is also unnecessary, given the very real impact that institutional solutions could have in this space.

So what can we do—as a field and as a community—to empower and support young women, and level the playing field for female advocates and champions in SRHR? While the provisional nature of our research has not allowed us to identify—or test—the universe of possible solutions, we offer the following suggestions for how to combat gender inequality and bring about positive change:

- *Find and equip* diverse populations of young women by involving them in the full program life cycle, providing successive opportunities for professional advancement, and developing more inclusive and sustainable leadership pipelines.
- *Enable young female leaders* by transforming gender norms; cultivating gender-equitable organizations and organizational cultures; establishing and implementing responsive safeguarding policies; mainstreaming female leadership; and adequately compensating and resourcing young women and their organizations.
- *Connect* young women to each other, and to ongoing professional opportunities, by formalizing female support networks.
- *Track* the gendered experiences, perceptions, and impacts of young women working in SRHR, with particular attention to how gender disparities operate in local contexts and affect underserved populations.

Young women remain uniquely positioned to revolutionize the SRHR space. The decisions they make—and the ways that they not only use power, but power change in the world around them—will determine the health and wellbeing of future generations.

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

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

YIELD Project Issue Paper

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