

# Resourcing Girls to Thrive



Key Findings and  
Recommendations Guide

Research exploring funding  
for adolescent girls' rights



**May 2023**

This guide offers a synthesized version of the Resourcing Girls to Thrive research report, highlighting the key findings and recommendations.



[Click here](#) to access the full report and related resources developed as part of the research.

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# Introduction



**G**irls and their allies lead, support, and contribute to a broad range of social justice efforts locally, nationally, and transnationally.<sup>1</sup> They are engaged in every social justice and national liberation movement, delivering direct services in their communities, reshaping formal systems and institutions, and pushing back against rising fascism, and authoritarianism. **Despite the power of adolescent girls' efforts and being a unique population, there is a disconnect between girls' expressed needs and the resources flowing to them.**

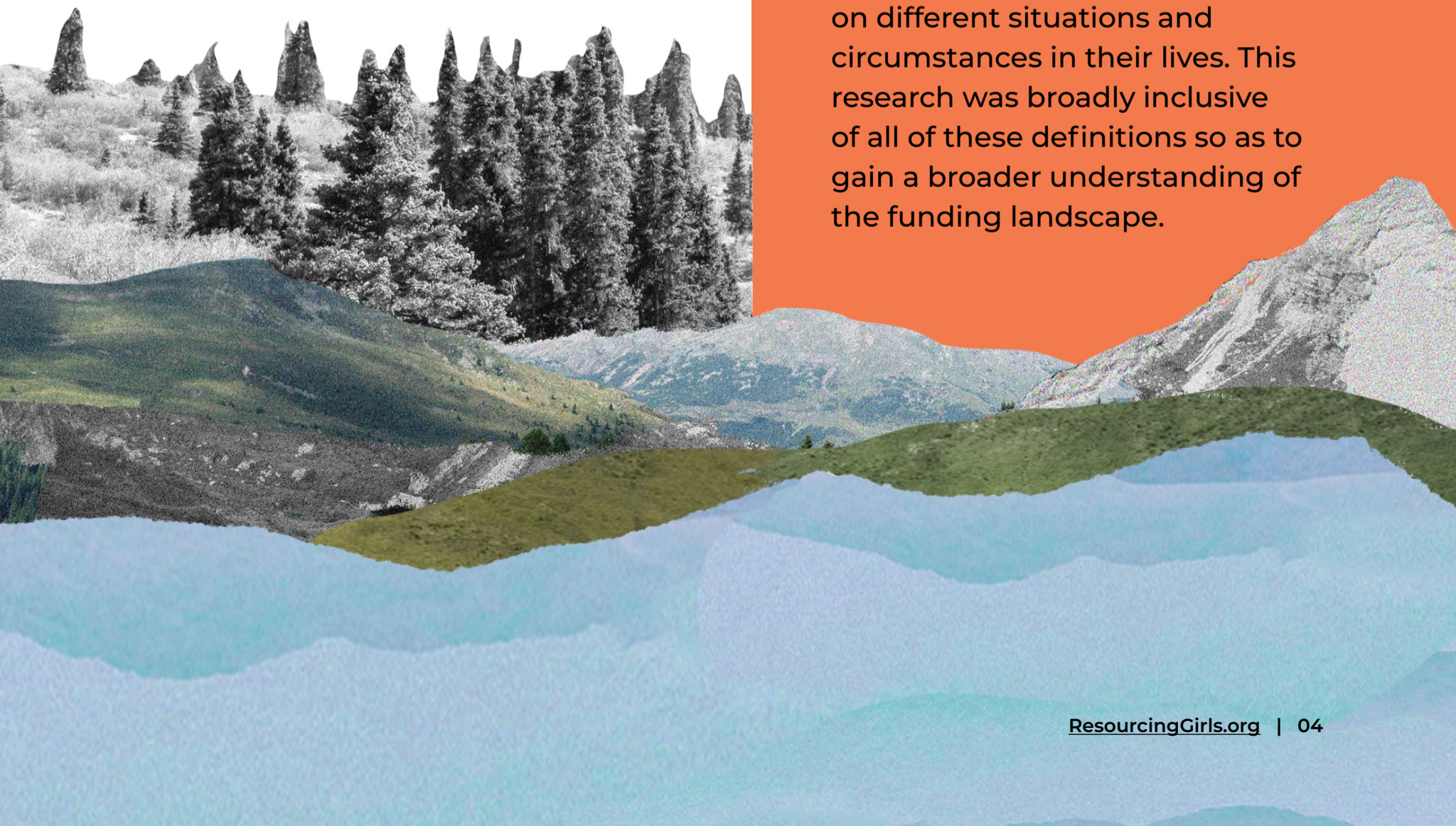
This research aimed to fill gaps in the understanding of the girls' funding landscape in terms of identifying the funders, the amounts and ways of funding distributions, and to what extent adolescent girls themselves are present across the funding landscape intended for them.<sup>2</sup> Our goal is to provide critical insights for funders, policy-makers, and practitioners who want to center adolescent girls and deliver transformational funding and support for them.<sup>3</sup>



- 1 The terms 'girls' and 'adolescent girls' are used interchangeably throughout this report, as such use of the term 'girls' throughout this report refers to 'adolescent girls'.
- 2 The research data collection period spanned June 2020 - June 2021.
- 3 Transformational resourcing recognizes the systemic oppressions that perpetuate inequality by flowing resources directly to girls and/or their allies to challenge and transform power relations and structures.

Contributions and insights from girls from across the world are included in our research, as well as feminist adolescent girl funders resourcing national, regional, and global efforts. We engaged a broad range of key stakeholders spanning academia, civil society, philanthropy, and government who are coming from the children's, women's, and youth funding fields. This guide highlights the main research findings, recommendations by type of actor(s), and concrete strategies beyond this research. It also includes scaffolding for a funding ecosystem that recognizes girls' agency and power, and is guided by the principles of accountability, agility, complementarity, and collectivism – in other words: a funding ecosystem that supports girls to thrive.

An understanding of **who is an adolescent girl** is not shared across the landscape. Most commonly 'adolescent girls' are defined through the lenses of sex and age, more specifically ages 8-19 or 12-19 years. In a more expansive definition, adolescent girls are also understood as people who self-identify as girls, including transgender and non-binary girls, and thus face similar and compounded discrimination, oppression, and exclusion in their communities and more broadly in society. Some feminist funders recognize that age and gender identity are an incomplete understanding of adolescent girls across different contexts, and even how girls self-identify as adult, as child, or as an adolescent can change fluidly and be based on different situations and circumstances in their lives. This research was broadly inclusive of all of these definitions so as to gain a broader understanding of the funding landscape.



# What thriving looks like to girls

Our research brought thirty-one girls aged 13–20 years together in four virtual, geography-based workshops with participants living in Brazil, Guatemala, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Morocco, Palestine, Jordan, Sudan, and Yemen to imagine a world where girls can thrive.<sup>4</sup> We asked, what would a funding ecosystem in this imagined world *look like, feel like, and practically do* with and for girls.

This is a summary of their vision: Girls visualized different places: both rural and urban, but always with a strong sense of community and allies at a communal level. The sensations and emotions they described when imagining this world are **power, freedom, success, protection, safety, a strong cultural identity, confidence, love, and joy.**

One of the most important aspects of an ecosystem is **the safety and protection** provided to girls so they can organize. Girls envision participating in public spaces where they feel safe and protected by their allies, creating a sense of freedom for them to continue to advocate for themselves and other girls – as well as to **speak their minds, grow, and connect to new experiences.**

Girls expressed their need to have **confidence and self-esteem** in order to speak up and interact with all the different actors in the funding ecosystem, such as teachers, community leaders, governments and funders. This confidence was linked to their protection from harassment and violence within their communities and public spaces.

Envisioning women in power in the ecosystem supported them even further to feel this sense of safety and protection. **Girls imagined having a say in every aspect of their lives.** They imagined expressing themselves through how they dress, speak and have relationships with freedom and non-discrimination. This includes **freedom to relate to funders in a way that feels natural to them and authentic to their lived experiences, rather than in formal and adult-centric ways.**



# Key research findings





## Girls are political actors and agents of power, yet they are severely under-resourced

*"Girls demand having a say in every aspect of their lives." - Girl research contributor*

Girls and their allies lead, support, and contribute to a broad range of justice efforts locally, nationally, and transnationally with individual and collective liberation as a goal. Yet, most funders are not recognizing girls' political agency in their funding or resourcing them adequately to meet their needs and materialize their visions. Girls' needs are vast, therefore vast interventions are needed. **While not all interventions are the same, and some can cause harm, centering girls and moving direct resources to them is a core element of funding lasting change in girls' lives.**

All actors need to support and resource girls' voices, agency, and power to control and decide on their own social, sexual and economic lives. And, while it is almost impossible to track funding amounts to girls – a problem rooted in broader invisibility and disbursement of

girls across funding sectors, girls being lumped together with other unique populations (e.g. women and girls, children, youth, young feminists), and girls being positioned as add-ons, thus depoliticizing and decentering them – we know that there is not enough money, or nearly the right quality of money, to support a vibrant funding ecosystem for adolescent girls. We know this because girls tell us this, over and over again, as is evidenced in this research and elsewhere.<sup>5,6</sup> We also know this to be true because of decades of experience working with, moving resources to, and advocating for adolescent girls across systems, sectors and settings.

*"A girl-centered approach to MADRE is ensuring that we understand the context in which girls are operating in, and ensuring our resources are able to reach them wherever they may be both geographically and in their activism." – MADRE*

4 The workshops with girls took place May - June 2021

5 FRIDA and Mama Cash (2018), Girls to the Front: A snapshot of girl-led organizing, [https://youngfeministfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GirlsToTheFront\\_Report\\_web.pdf](https://youngfeministfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GirlsToTheFront_Report_web.pdf)

6 FRIDA and AWID (2014), Brave, Creative, Resilient: The Global State of Young Feminist Organising, [https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/frida-awid\\_field-report\\_final\\_web\\_issuu.pdf](https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/frida-awid_field-report_final_web_issuu.pdf)



**Consistency, transparency, tracking and recognition of girls' agency are lacking in the girls' funding landscape**

*Girls want a world where they have power, freedom, success, protection, safety, a strong cultural identity, confidence, love and joy. – Girl research contributors*

After reviewing the publicly facing material of funders and practitioners across the landscape, it was evident that many describe their work through the language of liberation. However, there is a broad disconnect between language and practice. The use of similar terminologies, such as 'girl-centered,' among funders and practitioners can be misleading because it creates the impression of a cohesive and well-funded field, despite significant differences in how actors apply and interpret these terms. Such inconsistencies in understanding can have harmful effects, including co-optation.

Funders generally fail to communicate transparently and in ways that create accountability to girls. Information regarding funding amounts, eligibility criteria, and application processes is not easily accessible to girls and their allies in the public domain. Girls are



often engaged in tokenistic ways, where individual leadership is prioritized over collective, intergenerational, community-based engagement, perpetuating further harm. Despite the rhetoric of individual institutions, the bulk of current funding for girls treats them apolitically and as recipients of support instead of as essential stakeholders. While this failure to recognize various populations' political agency and power overall can be said about philanthropic practices in general, we find it particularly true for adolescent girls, coinciding with intersecting age and gender-related social norms that limit trust in girls' agency.

*"We strive to ensure the experiences, context and work of young women are highlighted, so we facilitate spaces for peer learning and political dialogue." – Fondo Centro Americano de Mujeres*

Feminist funders who support adolescent girls offer insight from novel funding strategies that recognize power dynamics and girls' political agency – including direct resourcing of girls and various engagement approaches. While they do not yet wield significant resources relative to other funders in the landscape – a survey of 13 feminist funders supporting girls reported a total combined \$41.3 million in grantmaking dollars in 2021 – they look beyond their own organizations to improve the funding landscape for girls through philanthropic advocacy and learning and with other funders.



## The dominant funding frameworks in the landscape tend to contradict each other

*"We aim to recognize and understand power relations, age specificities and diversity of experiences and backgrounds of girls." – FRIDA*

The frameworks funders choose to guide their engagement with girls reflect the funder's politics and purposes, which in turn shape their funding priorities and practices. The frames that funders choose impact everything from how decisions are being made (and by whom) to the practical, technical details of program design and implementation. The two predominant frameworks used by funders in our analysis center girls' protection or their agency. These two frameworks are sometimes in tension with one another not only across the landscape, but also within individual institutions, particularly

private foundations. Thus, a framework analysis of the girls funding landscape by sector and issue funding streams, rather than by actor, is a more useful approach to understanding how girls are being resourced. Reviewing frames and comparing them with practices is helpful in identifying gaps and disconnects between what funders say they want to do and aspire to achieve and what they are actually doing. Understanding these dynamics help address a central inquiry of this research: how do the politics and practices of funders impact the lives of adolescent girls?

While approaches will look different depending on the type of actor, when adolescent girls' political agency is recognized in funding frameworks, for example human rights and feminist frameworks, funding approaches address the root causes of girls' oppression. When funding is moved through framing that does not recognize girls as political actors, which can happen when focusing only on their protection, funding approaches address symptoms of oppression and can work to perpetuate systems of oppression. Each funding intervention needs to consider girls' own visions and voices,

thus expanding frameworks and related implementation approaches to include girls' political agency. In this way, funders can contribute to a funding ecosystem where girls can thrive, where girls' safety and agency are in harmony, while also ensuring support for adolescent girls is connected and productive.

*"We are ambitiously working to reframe power in philanthropic practice, showing what is possible when girls are put at the centre of resource distribution."  
– Purposeful*



# Recommendations to build a girl-centered funding ecosystem





**G**rounded in girls' vision for thriving and through an in-depth analysis of multiple actors and their interventions from several angles (actor type, funding modality, issue funding preference, etc.), we gained a better understanding of the current state of the adolescent girls' funding landscape. These resulting recommendations, with relevant guidance by actor, offer a roadmap for cultivating a transformational funding ecosystem that, by centering girls, resources them to thrive.



**See girls as political actors.**

Recognize, center, and trust girls in all programming by asking them about their needs and involving them in creating solutions and decision-making processes, trusting them as experts of their own lived realities, recognizing them for their contributions, and where possible, compensating them.

**Definitions:**



**All actors**



**Funding girls and allies directly:** Feminist funders, women's funds, youth funds, some INGOs, some NGOs.



**Funding intermediaries:** Private foundations, bilaterals and multi-laterals, high net-worth individuals.



**Programmatic interventions:** INGOs, Feminist funders, women's funds.



**System change:** government ministries, education, health, public services and systems, girls.



**Integrate power-building approaches into all program strategies, frameworks, tools and curricula.**

A power-building approach is distinct from empowerment approaches and means building a common understanding and educating all staff across the organization, beyond the programmatic or grantmaking team to finance, operations and fundraising.



## Embrace transparency, humility, accountability, and collaboration to reduce barriers and track data collectively.

While this recommendation may be understood as value-based, there are practical ways to integrate it. Communicate with transparency and clarity about funding limitations and requirements. Hold space and bridge conversations with a diversity of partners on how they can deepen their accountability to girls. Approach this work with humility by recognizing there are many actors in the landscape and all are at different stages of learning. Partner across the ecosystem and collaborate with other funders to overcome limitations or barriers and to learn and track funding data collectively.



7 Purposeful (2022). *Building Girls Power: Perspectives on theory and practice in with with adolescent girls*. <https://wearepurposeful.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/building-girls-power.pdf>

8 FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund (2019), *No Straight Lines: Transformations with young feminist organisers*, <http://nostraightlines.youngfeministfund.org/>

9 Elevate Children Funders Group(2023), *Weaving a Collective Tapestry: A Funders Toolkit for Child and Youth Participation*, <https://elevatechildren.org/publications-cyptoolkit>



## **Center girls' power and agency in advocacy and funding strategies.**

Build a strong analysis of the political power of girl-led activism into your advocacy and funding, including how to fund movements in their diverse representation. Incorporate strong throughlines to fundraising and external affairs teams so that girls' power and agency are being named across institutional departments.



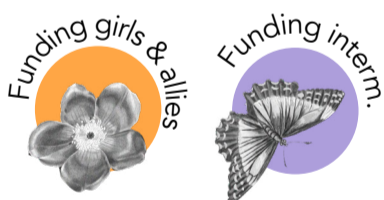
## **Align politics and practices across all internal institutional functions.**

Centering girls' power and agency means building a common understanding and ways of working across the organization, beyond the programmatic or grantmaking team to finance, operations and fundraising. How that is understood both internally and externally is critical to tracking the money and the state of funding for girls.



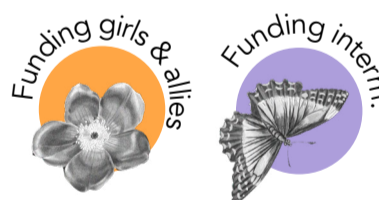
## **Avoid abrupt exits, switches, and lack of transparency.**

Give forethought to and provide transparent communication when leaving the field or changing priorities.



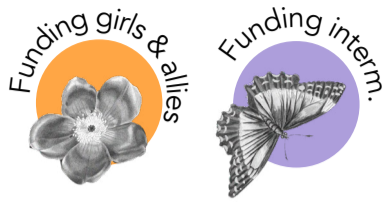
## **Prioritize flexibility and funding core support.**

A lack of funding for girls and their allies is often the result of funder criteria that restrict contextualized organizations from applying for funding. Providing this kind of funding respects local expertise, centers girls' experiences, and allows for responsive interventions to meet girls' needs.



## **Dedicate funding for adolescent girls within strategies and budgets.**

This means being both inclusive and specific, committing to girls as a population distinct within sector-, population-, and issue-based strategies and budgets. It also means providing accompanying direct funding for girls.



## Use access, relationships, and power to support girls.

Use your access, and relationships to funders and funder convening spaces, to advocate building girls' power and resourcing them. And use your power – particularly with national governments – to open space for girls and ensure their voices and visions are foregrounded in decision-making *(in particular for governments and multilateral agencies)*.



## Integrate politicized approaches.

Where you are engaged in direct work, partner with practitioners to integrate politicized approaches to the work across program lifecycles - from advocacy to services to communications. This means addressing root causes of issues, grounding directly in what girls need as an ongoing practice, providing political education for girls, working in context-specific ways in the broadest, most rooted sense, naming all choices as political choices (because there is no neutral girl's work), and understanding girls as autonomous power holders who also have unique needs at the intersections of age and gender.<sup>10</sup>



## Engage and work directly with local and national based groups that are centering girls.

And, partner with and channel resources to funders (e.g. intermediaries such as feminist funders, and women's funds) who are well placed to reach girls organizing where they are and directly fund them. This applies in particular to source funders including private, multilateral funders and bilateral funders.

10 Purposeful (2022). Building Girls Power: Perspectives on theory and practice in with with adolescent girls. <https://wearepurposeful.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/building-girls-power.pdf>



# Strategies beyond this research



This research is an offering and a conversation starter for all actors in the adolescent girls funding landscape. To effect change toward a transformative funding ecosystem, our goal is to catalyze more research and collective conversations that also include adolescent girls. Building a more effective funding ecosystem for adolescent girls will be a multi-year process, moving well beyond any individual research project. We offer the following gaps and strategies this research identified as contributions actors could make toward advancing and expanding the transformative work with and for girls:



### **Convene across all types of funders and *include girls*:**

A starting point for any collective conversation can focus on the funding ecosystem scaffolding with emergent collective processes and strategies around advocacy, resource mobilization, and importantly – the practices of centering girls political agency.

A funding ecosystem in which girls can thrive recognizes girls' agency and power and is guided by the principles of accountability, agility, complementarity, and collectivism. This scaffolding of a funding ecosystem such as this can be found in the Resourcing Girls to Thrive research report.



### **Research to deepen understanding of the landscape:**

Funders can use the tools developed through the research (this includes the taxonomy and ecosystem scaffolding) to analyze and improve resourcing for adolescent girls. These tools can be used within organizations and across funder collaborations to develop data infrastructure for ongoing analysis and action toward a transformational funding ecosystem. Further development of guides for these tools is needed for adaptation and in advance of their use beyond this research. In addition, we recommend the following initiatives to build on the offerings developed through this research:



### **Illustrative case studies:**

In-depth case studies can offer learning for actors and concrete ways of working to those who are new to funding adolescent girls, including practical studies that illustrate how to engage girls as essential stakeholders in funding practices. Case studies would also be useful to demonstrate the crucial role of girls in other bigger movements across the world, to uplift and recognize their pivotal role in wider organizing for change.



### **Government contributions research:**

We did not delve into particular governments' funding as it was beyond the scope of this landscape analysis. We believe it is essential to develop in-depth case studies of country-level funding flows, using a consistent methodology across countries for comparative analysis and learning so as to inform future roles of government funding for adolescent girls.



### **Internal institutional dynamics research:**

We turned to a funding streams analysis after realizing that within a funding institution, there can be several divergent approaches to funding adolescent girls. Looking deeper into institutional dynamics, developing case studies, and facilitating internal alignment work within institutions that experience this dynamic could be a useful step forward towards a coherent transformational ecosystem.



### **Program funding research:**

We primarily looked at grantmaking support towards adolescent girls; we did not look at programmatic budgets of institutions. Further research on programmatic budgets could shine a light on how much funding is flowing toward girls and the extent to which those funds actually reach and support girls and allies using transformational approaches.



### **Funding streams research:**

In-depth analysis of each funding stream is needed to understand the patterns of behaviors, frameworks, and potentially illuminate actual funding amounts.



## Engage in mutual advocacy and learning:

To promote mutual learning and advocacy between feminists and other funders, our research recommends collective conversations that center girls and deepen understanding of the funding landscape. The following practices can support this strategy:



### Deepen practice learning around resourcing adolescent girls:

Collaborative structures and spaces are needed for funders learning how to recognize adolescent girls as a constituency and resource them. Developing practice case studies coming out of these learning processes across different funder types would be an important contribution from these processes.



### Varied and contextualized approaches to mutual advocacy:

An ecosystem where girls can thrive requires that all actors move into relationships with other actors toward a deeper understanding of how to center girls' needs in resource flows. Funders can pursue atypical partnerships, across local and national levels, and including governments.



Adolescent girls around the world are holding more responsibilities, power, and burden to determine their own present and future, and that of their communities. It is our collective responsibility to establish a funding ecosystem that supports them to thrive. Our greatest hope is that this research sparks conversations and contributes to the evolution and establishment of a funding ecosystem where girls are recognized as political actors and provided with dedicated resources that meet their needs. Partnering with organizations using a transformational approach and engaging with girls directly, where appropriate, can help structure funding and inform its flow. Philanthropic advocacy by feminist funders welcomes such kinds of thought partnerships.

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## Researchers



This research was co-led by Angelika Arutyunova and Amy Babchek, with Emily Battistini, Ruby Johnson, and Boikanyo Modungwa.

The views expressed in this report are formed and articulated by the authors and based on the inputs of all the contributors to the report; the views of the authors may not reflect the views of the institutions and individuals involved in their entirety.

## Working Group



The working group for this research was an intentional grouping of individuals and institutions representing multiple entry points into the adolescent girls' funding field that advised the research. The working group held the research process together with the research team to help shape the research, review the state of the adolescent girls funding landscape, and promote the research findings and recommendations. From December 2020- September 2021, the following individuals contributed to the research as working group members:

Saadat Baigazieva, FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund  
Georgia Booth, Plan International

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