

Girls' Rights Portfolio Reflection Journey



THE
KENDEDA FUND

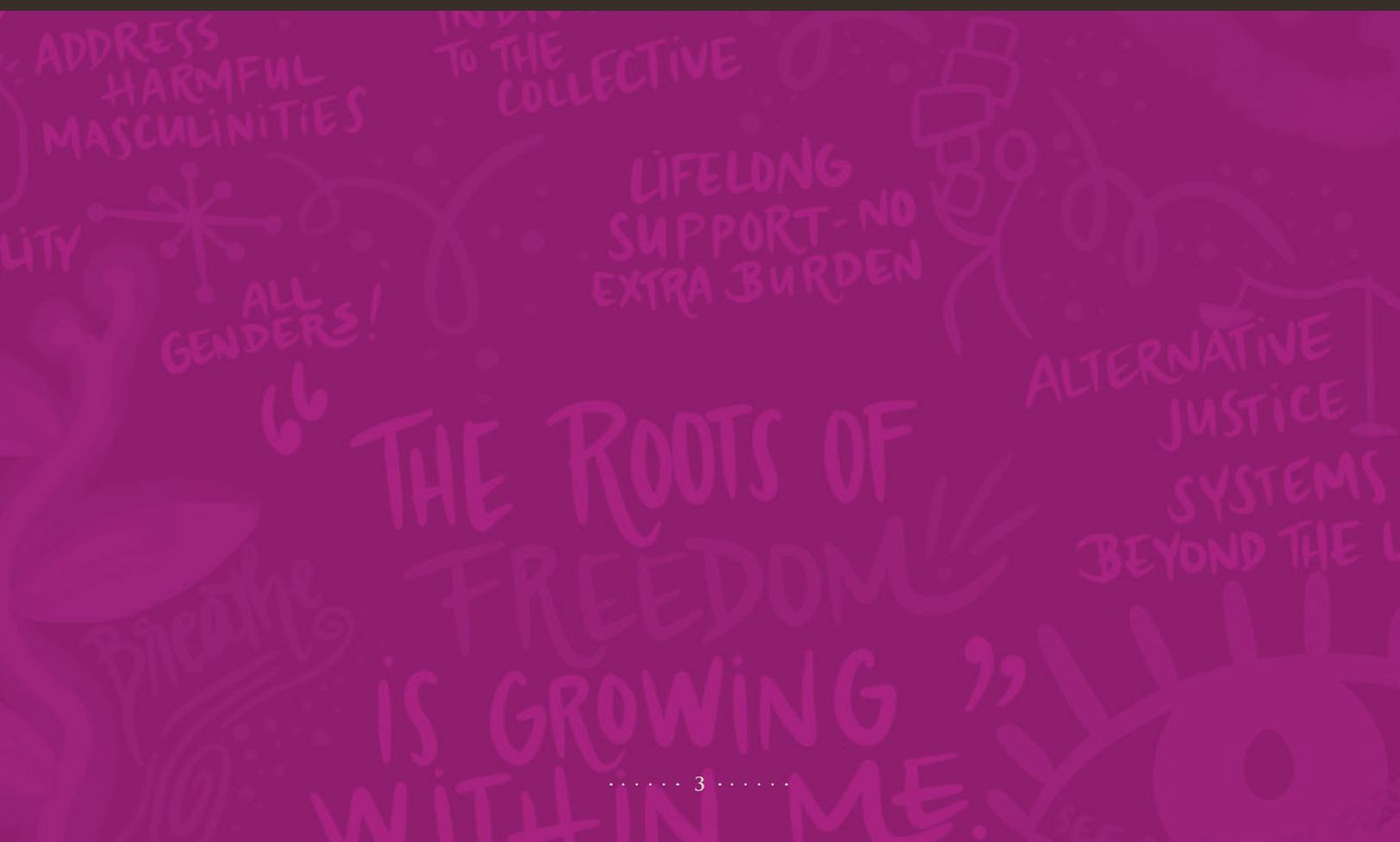


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The Invitation



In the Summer of 2022, as The Kendeda Fund further clarified the specifics around our long-planned spend out at the end of 2023, the topic of final grantee reports came up. What were the Fund’s wishes and expectations to receive “final reports” from long-standing, core grantees in each of our program areas?

Relatively quickly, we determined that traditional grantee reports would not be necessary or particularly useful to us or to our grantee partners. We decided to make final grants with no expectation of a final report. Instead, we invited a small number of grantee partners across each of our program areas to participate in a process to help clarify this moment, and describe, as best as possible, our grantees’ thinking on where their respective fields ought to evolve. After all, while we were “exiting the highway”, our grantee partners’ vision was fixed squarely down the road, into a future without the Kendeda Fund.

In exchange for their time, our commitment was to share these “voices of our grantees” with our respective fields. It was, perhaps, our last opportunity to amplify their ideas and wishes.

And so, six of our Fund Advisors set about putting in motion processes to gather our core grantees’ insights. In some cases, conversations were held as a collective; in others, one-on-one. In all cases, we used outside facilitators and writers from different areas like academia, journalism and evaluation to gain additional perspectives.

Our aspiration is that funders and practitioners engage with these insights and use them to inform their own approach to the work in the future.

Girls’ Rights: A 10-year Journey

Kendeda began our girls’ rights work ten years ago. At that time, our vision was to catalyze the creation of a world in which all girls systematically have the capabilities, choices, security and power to fully realize their human potential.

We focused on early and child marriage as our entry point because it's a widespread human-rights abuse and also a gateway issue for changing how families, communities, and governments value girls.

Our strategy rested on a belief that cultural change has to come from communities themselves, and cannot be legislated, mandated, or internationally driven. Thus, we relied on community-level investments as the backbone of our strategy around which everything else was built. That said, we understood that community-level change could be stymied or given tremendous momentum by larger forces. Thus, we sought to do what we could to influence the environment for community groups and movements. This included things like bringing more focus and attention to girls' issues, elevating the voices of girls and women from the Global South, or sharing what we or others were learning about effective practice as quickly and loudly as possible.

Given this “vertical” funding model (grassroots groups + larger allies + learning + advocacy) as well as our belief that grassroots grantmaking is the fundamental pillar upon which other grantmaking must rest, it was critical that our “on the ground” work be done with partners that both we and communities trusted.

As we got into the work, we identified some goals for ourselves over the ten-year lifespan of this portfolio:

- 1 Significant evidence of attitudinal and behavioral shifts amongst girls and their families in targeted communities about girls' rights in general and marriage in particular.**
- 2 Information about what generated the above shifts.**
- 3 A stronger network of organizations and social movements working on this issue explicitly (both more organizations and more connected and capable organizations).**
- 4 More nuanced, robust dialogue and representation around the problem and the most promising solutions.**
- 5 More aligned public and private money flowing into this issue space.**

The following report is written in the collective voice, which acknowledges several realities, both positive and negative. As we started this grantmaking, child marriage was not generally considered a “feminist” issue; rather, it was squarely in the domain of child protection. Over 10 years, our grantmaking helped to knit

OUR VISION WAS TO CATALYZE THE CREATION OF A WORLD IN WHICH ALL GIRLS SYSTEMATICALLY HAVE THE CAPABILITIES, CHOICES, SECURITY AND POWER TO FULLY REALIZE THEIR HUMAN POTENTIAL.

together a strong tapestry of organizations and movement actors who brought a feminist orientation to the work, one that acknowledged patriarchy, not poverty, as the critical driver of child marriage.

The fact that our grantees can speak in a collective voice is a testament to their alignment and the strength of their shared understanding. That said, I would be remiss to not acknowledge that their collective voice also serves as a protective factor. As this report details, our grantees are not being ignored; rather, they are being targeted by conservative, authoritarian forces who would seek to silence social movements and activists.

While I will always proudly represent our grantees work as best I can, I'd encourage you to engage them directly on any reactions to this report. They are among the most generous, thoughtful colleagues I have ever known, and I'm confident that your engagement with them will be as transforming for you as it has been for me.

— Dena Kimball



Our **Collective** Invitation

As the Kendeda Fund leaves the CEFMU girls' rights ecosystem, the collective of changemakers, grantmakers, girl activists, grassroots organizations they have supported over a decade are continuing their work—bravely tackling the complex and trickier issues in addressing CEFMU and promoting girls' rights through visionary thought and courageous practice.

The reflections shared here are an offering to the broader CEFMU and girls' rights field. Our collective hope is for these reflections to be a conversation starter, a resource, and a tool for anyone in the CEFMU and girls' rights ecosystem dreaming up a future where our own liberation is tied to the liberation of girls everywhere.



The Learning Journey

This collective reflection and learning journey offered an invitation to look back and vision forward for child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) and the girls' rights global discourse. It was an opportunity to situate ourselves in the “whys” of the work, to reflect on the broader trends, fields, movements and communities in which the work resides, and to lift up both short and long-term visions, hopes, and incantations for girls and their futures.

As feminist researchers, we believe learning and reflection are political acts that deserve nurturing approaches for authentic collective dialogues. Consequently, the design of the reflection and learning journey was guided by the principles of meaningful engagement, holistic care, and appreciative inquiry.

The virtual journey included a:

- ▶ **Qualitative questionnaire**
[view full size version online](#) or on page **45**
- ▶ **Facilitated dialogues with practitioners**
[view full size version online](#) or on page **46**
- ▶ **Individual and group discussions with those working in grantmaking organizations**
[view full size version online](#) or on page **47**

The overall takeaways from the learning journey are a set of timely and necessary reflections and

recommendations that we have organized in the following way:

Part 1: Freedom dreams and grounding in the current moment

In this section we share participant reflections on the implications of this current moment and highlight their hopes, aspirations and the guiding stars that shape their work and its (un)imagined possibilities.

Part 2: Inviting Paradigm Shifts — Lessons from the Frontline

In this section we explore the emerging themes and ideas that came out of the learning journey organized by:

- ▶ Narratives
- ▶ Policy and programming
- ▶ Funding

FREEDOM DREAM

T TO PLEASURE + OPPORTUNITIES + PLAY

LA LIBERTAD DE LOS SUEÑOS DE LOS Y LAS NIÑAS

FREEDOM TO BE DIFFERENT + HONOR OUR DIVERSITY

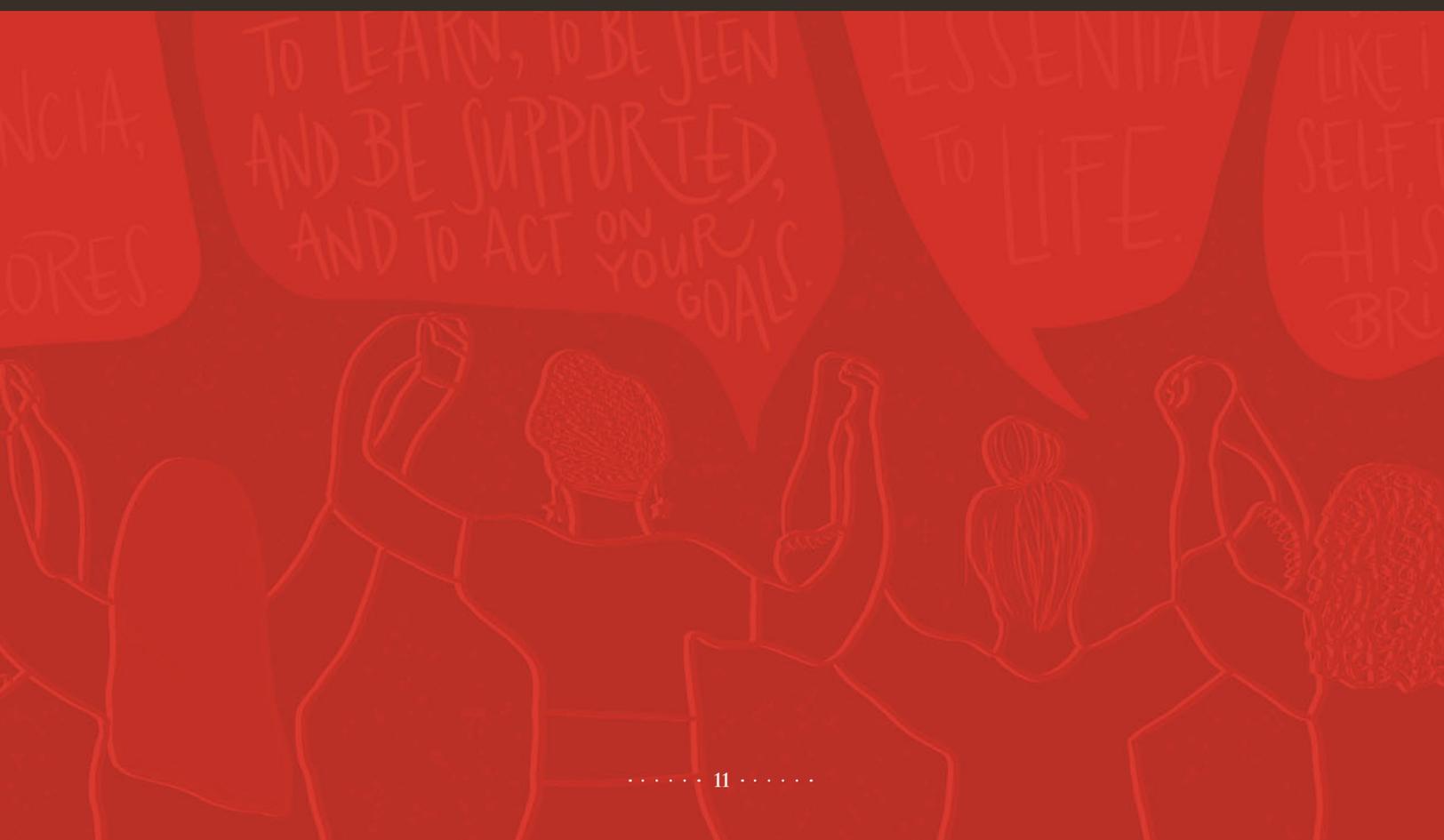
FREEDOM IS A BIRTHRIGHT

FREEDOM TO LEARN, TO BE JEEN AND BE SUPPORTED, AND TO ACT ON YOUR GOALS.

ESSENTIAL TO LIFE.

LIKE I SELF, HIS BRU

Part 1: Freedom dreams and grounding in the current moment



Imagined Futures

We opened our discussions by asking participants to define their freedom dreams and articulate the worlds they are working toward.

Participants painted **a brilliant tapestry of freedom dreams** as a harmonious symphony of cantos y flores, where young girls blossom without the burden of violence. Of play and pleasure, where freedom is not an individual pursuit, but rather a collective endeavor. Freedom as a boundless expanse where dreams take flight. As intimately intertwined with a sense of belonging and connection. As a birthright accessible to all, an essential lifeline that nourishes our spirits and propels us forward.



A tapestry of freedom dreams ([view full-size version online](#)) or page 48

"THE ANTI-RIGHTS AND ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENTS ARE ATTACKING HUMAN RIGHTS AND THREATENING DEMOCRACY ACROSS THE GLOBE, ROLLING BACK ADVANCES WE'VE MADE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN EVERY CORNER OF THE WORLD."

This Moment

At the onset of the pandemic, Arundhati Roy astutely observed, "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew... [pandemics are a] portal, a gateway between one world and the next." Reflecting on these past few years, we are compelled to question competing concepts of world-building and assess the type of world that global conservatism seeks to construct, juxtaposed with the transformative visions and reimaginations offered and being built by feminist organizers.

Amidst the backdrop and fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, a concerning upsurge in global conservatism and fundamentalism has surfaced, posing significant threats to the lives of women, girls, and gender-expansive individuals. Numerous governments have implemented regressive policies that undermine hard-fought advancements in human rights and gender justice. In the United States there are systematic attacks on transgender lives and a gradual erosion of reproductive rights, resulting in substantial barriers to abortion access. Uganda's patriarchal and oppressive anti-homosexuality laws represent some of the most severe anti-queer policies worldwide. Meanwhile, in India, the Supreme Court's ruling against equal inheritance rights for daughters perpetuates gender disparities in property rights.

These obfuscations in the legal and policy landscape are frequently accompanied by deliberate and violent assaults on feminist organizers and civil society institutions. Gender justice spaces have become sites of sustained patriarchal violence, perpetuated by both individuals and states. And yet, **amidst this rise in conservatism and violence, there is a resilient resistance and a growing determination to counter these regressive trends.** Women, girls, and gender expansive people continue to courageously stand up against these injustices, and dream, vision, and build possibilities, portals, and worlds that hold us all.

“The anti-rights and anti-gender movements are attacking human rights and threatening democracy across the globe, rolling back advances we've made for human rights in every corner of the world. Girls so often bear the brunt of the impact, including lost reproductive rights, progressive education, comprehensive sexuality education, LGBTQI rights and more. While girls are at the forefront in responding to this backlash and repressive regimes, they are too often left out of conversations about the impact, solutions and funding strategies to counter this assault.”

Below, we gather the rich language and ideas expressed by partners as they reflect on this political moment and envision future worlds.



Photo: Sasithon Pooviriyakul, courtesy of American Jewish World Service

Shifting political landscape

“The starkest case in my mind is the new age of marriage law in India — violent opposition to women and girls' rights under the guise of protection ... The current political space has made all of us rework our strategies of working, but I feel the solid perspective and ground that [was] created will be beneficial in the long run.”

Feminist changemaking faces violent opposition in the current political landscape. The roll back of hard-won progressive policies and the introduction of new regressive laws makes their work much more challenging. However, the years of building collective feminist change agendas continues to provide fertile ground to counter the backlash and provide opportunities for moving forward with courage, coordination, and persistence. Now, more than ever, it is crucial to ensure the sustainable resourcing of these efforts.

Resurgence of right-wing fundamentalism and entrenched patriarchy

"Institutionalized patriarchy is a major challenge we face in our work. Having those in power, both in an official/formal capacity like the government, as well as in more informal capacities such as village elders/religious heads etc, [who] have a draconian mindset to girls' rights and empowerment, undermines the gains that have been made and continue to be made in the girls' rights space over the past 10-15 years."

There is powerful and renewed resistance to a growing global conservatism as women, girls and gender-expansive people claim their rights and find new pathways for collective organizing. There is a need to double down in the support to feminist girls' rights organizers if we hope to maintain and leverage the gains they have spearheaded over the past few decades and strengthen the resistance to right-wing agendas. Without adequate resources, feminist girls' rights organizers cannot be expected to effectively combat the financial investments pouring into anti-gender movements.

"The rise of fundamentalisms and anti-rights agendas are not confined to adolescent girls' rights but they are at the nexus of power, age, sexuality, reproduction, production, religion, and so on. So, while ...not unique [to girls], they do and will continue to feel the effects of shrinking civil spaces, rights, and support for their bodily autonomy and decision-making as an equal member of a household, community, and/or society."

Restrictive policies

"We have seen that the work of our members in many countries has become increasingly difficult because of more restrictive civic spaces. We have seen examples of countries where our members are having difficulty advocating for or opposing any government policy/laws/programmes. We have also seen that funding grassroots activism is becoming increasingly difficult due to restrictive government spaces. These challenges are making it harder for civil society to work collectively to continue making gains."

The increasingly restrictive government policies designed to suffocate the civil society in many countries are impacting girls' rights work in significant ways and creating new operational challenges for feminist

organizations. In this context, it's imperative for the global girls' rights and CEFMU field to collectively strategize on how to continue moving money and resources to grassroots changemakers.

COVID-19 and economic stress/poverty

“During the COVID-19 related lockdown, we saw huge losses in the gains we had made for girls' rights across the country ... UNICEF projects that an additional 10 million girls will marry as children by 2030 due to COVID-19 restrictions, school closures, increased adolescent pregnancy, disruption to child marriage programming and economic instability.”

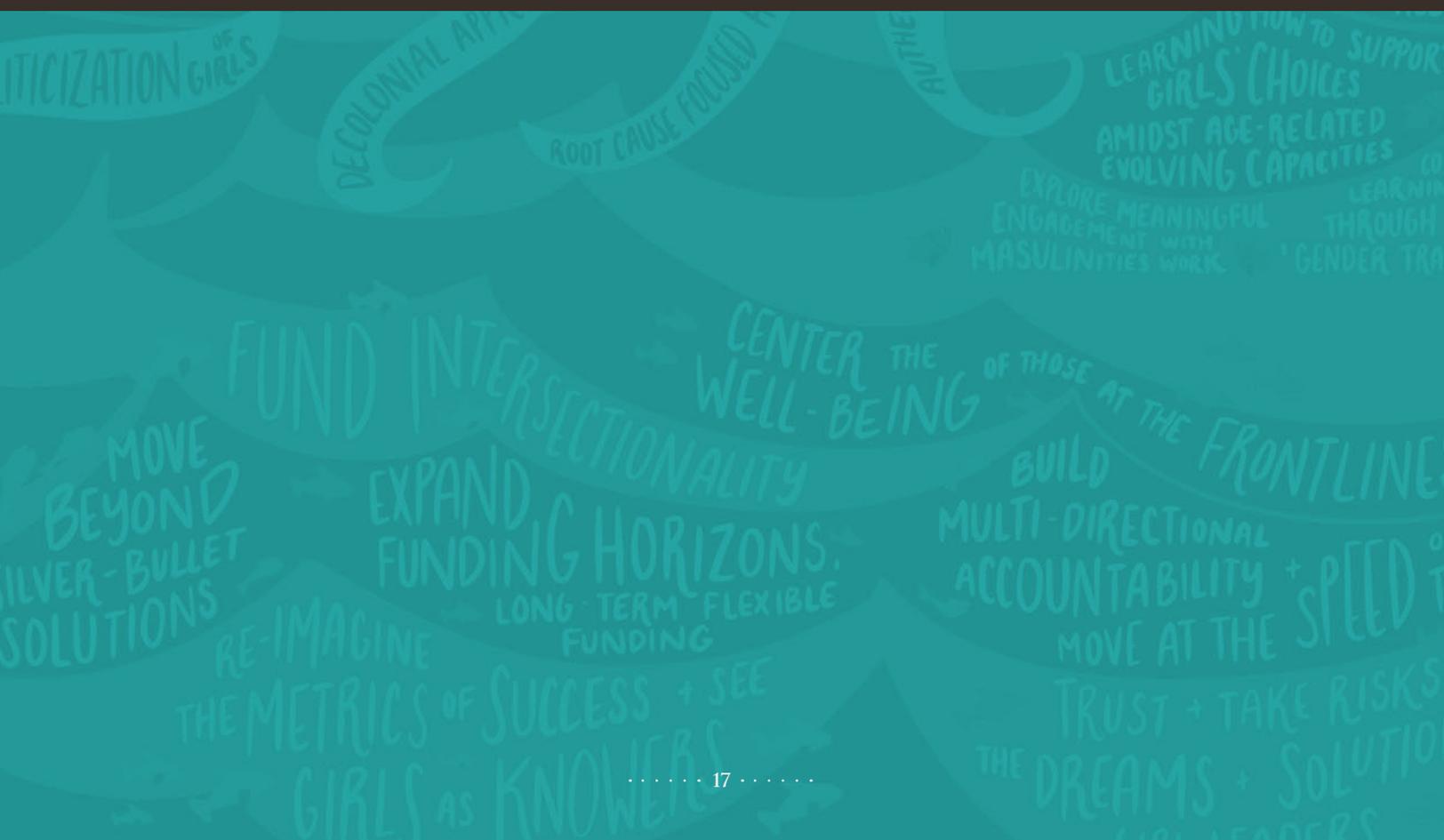
The pandemic shone a bright spotlight on the fragility of many existing global systems of care and the ways they are stacked against the most vulnerable. Girls disproportionately felt the painful impact of the shutdowns and economic losses during the pandemic. They also demonstrated ingenuity and perseverance in efforts to counter the challenges they faced. Given the challenges posed by climate change and the potential for future disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential for funders and organizers in the broader field of CEFMU to collaboratively envision and brainstorm with girls on strategies to enhance resilience and overcome such setbacks.



Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik, courtesy of American Jewish World Service



Part 2: Inviting Paradigm Shifts — Lessons from the Frontline



The current moment demands that we understand dominant paradigms and support and explore changes that are transformative and root-cause oriented. In this way, progress toward girls' rights becomes intertwined with deep and long-term shifts towards gender equity and justice.

Through the reflection journey, participants articulated the dominant paradigms, the transformative paradigms and the “good trouble” (visionary explorations, further collective problem solving, and strategic risks) within the narratives, programs and policies, and funder actions in the CEFMU and girls' rights ecosystem.

Dominant paradigms are approaches that are currently and commonly in practice. These approaches are not transformative in nature and show what the field needs to move beyond to be truly responsive to the needs and complexities of girls' lives and CEFMU.

Transformative paradigms invite more nuanced thinking that can influence critical shifts in narratives, programming, policy, and funding practice. These approaches embrace gender transformative strategies and target root causes of CEFMU. This is where support for learning, risk-taking, and adapting is essential. While this report does not provide all the answers, the narrative suggests directions and approaches. If supported holistically, they offer the potential for catalytic long-term changes in girls' lives.

Good trouble includes concepts, thinking, approaches, contradictions, and ideas that invite re-thinking, further ideating, and problem solving, based on learnings and insights emerging from transformative paradigms. Here, the answers are not yet clear, but collective pursuit holds promise for deep and long-lasting changes in the lives of girls.

“Having ‘girls’ rights met’ won’t ever be a ‘done’ thing; or at least not ‘by 2033.’ I say this NOT to be discouraging, but to instead urge donors to understand the struggles for rights as a long-long-long haul effort and to be prepared to stay in it as long as possible.”

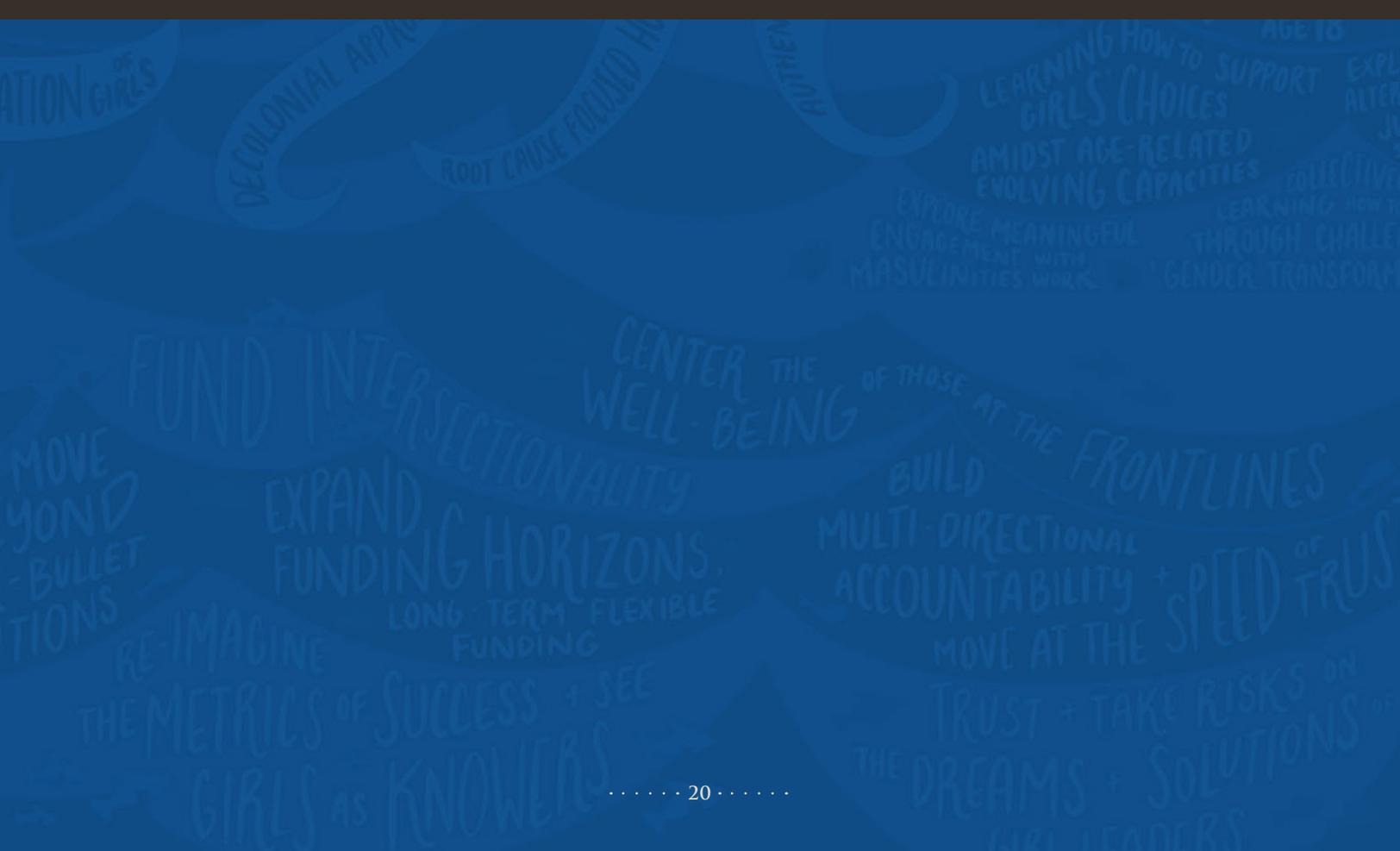
The above paradigms and “good trouble” exist across a symbiotic continuum. The paradigms speak to prominent spaces within the CEFMU and girls' rights discourse at this current socio-political moment. **The "good trouble" calls upon the field to envision and engage in collective problem-solving, opting for bold and courageous choices instead of quick, temporary solutions.** All three are in conversation with each other and interdependent and should not be viewed as binary and/or linear in their relationships with each other. Shifts in each area create ripples and changes in the other areas and the goal is for the overall field to collectively move towards the most transformative approaches, acknowledging that the different parts of the ecosystem are in different starting points on the journey.



Transformative paradigms ([view full-size version online](#)) or [page 50](#)



Narratives



When we discuss narrative shift, we refer to the desired changes, re-imaginings, and transformations in the prevailing stories, discourses, or ideas that shape our collective understanding of and approaches to CEFMU. Narratives hold significant power within this context, influencing perceptions and shaping the trajectory of the field.

As they envision the future of the field, participants articulated the dominant narrative that informs the field, identified the narrative shifts that are currently underway, and lifted up the challenges and questions they are continuing to work through.



Narrative shift paradigms (view full-size version online) or page 49

Who is the ideal girl?

“What we see many times in our world is that certain imagery catches on. And that is an idea of a certain girl, or young woman demonstrating agency...someone pursuing formal education, career-oriented, ambitious...there's a certain kind of imagery that emerges among girls and communities. And in the social sector [this influences] some of the images around measurement. So, actually, [we need] to populate that imagery with the huge diversity and...what freedom would look like... I also personally feel that agency is too individual centric, and the idea of freedom and equality is a much larger idea.”

"NARRATIVES ARE THE FABRIC OF OUR SHARED EXPERIENCES, SHAPING HOW WE UNDERSTAND OURSELVES, EACH OTHER, AND THE WORLD."

Participants highlighted how the pervasive and narrow image of the "ideal girl" continues to drive the funding and development discourse.

The images of girlhood in the dominant spaces are often binary, heteronormative, and linear, and exclude the experiences of young people beyond these narratives. The narrow "ideal girl" images further perpetuate harmful binaries of "good girl" and "bad girl" narratives. So the girl who is not "excelling at school, being a leader and shunning the attention of boys" or does not fit into patriarchal and heteronormative ideals is associated with the image of a "bad girl," curtailing her agency and her ability to navigate her sexuality and her sense of self.

Transformative spaces embrace a more nuanced, complex, and diverse imagery of what girls can be. They make space for girls' stories to be celebrated across expansive areas and intersections, inclusive and responsive to "adolescence" and girls' sexuality across the continuum, beyond the binary and heteronormative narrative. These are narratives where girls who might not be in school, might not be "leaders," might be pregnant, or might have even chosen to get married are also celebrated as strong and resilient, and equally deserving of chances, resources, access to opportunities and services, and pathways to safe and joyful lives.

Shifting from "victims" to "changemakers"

"Girls are leading, and will continue to lead, transformational social change critical to all struggles for freedom and justice. Yet, for too long, girls' stories and their power have been erased, co-opted, or pushed aside. This has led to top-down, ageist development models which bring "evidence-based" solutions that treat girls as beneficiaries or even victims of their situation... There have been so many narratives that position girls as helpless victims and imagery that tell a singular story about CEFMU that does not accurately reflect girls' experiences... Girls have a fundamental right to narrate their own lives, to see accurate images of themselves in the world and to engage in deep dialogue about their realities."

A **“victim” versus “empowered” narrative** nested within “white savior” rhetoric continues to be widespread amidst dominant funding and programmatic approaches. This is embodied in the portrayal of girls, especially those in the global majority¹ as passive victims, as unknowing and innately vulnerable, who need interventions developed largely in the Global North to empower them. This narrative exploits other areas of marginalization such as disability, caste, and class to further portray girls at these intersections as helpless “victims.” However, girls have been, and continue to be architects of solutions, as knowers and drivers of change and as survivors. Transformative narratives acknowledge the innate power of girls and intervene in the ways in which systems interact to limit them, while creating enabling and safe environments for girls to tap into and grow their inherent potential as changemakers.

“Narratives are the fabric of our shared experiences, shaping how we understand ourselves, each other, and the world. Narratives drive how decisions are made in our own lives and at the funding, policy, and programmatic level. This is true more broadly with girls' rights, and especially in the CEFMU space.”



¹Definition of people of the global majority: <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/schools/school-of-education/final-leeds-beckett-1102-global-majority.pdf>

“LIKE PHOTOSYNTHESIS, THE ROOT OF FREEDOM IS GROWING WITHIN ME, WHICH WILL HELP ME TO FLY AND ACHIEVE MY DREAMS!”

— Adrita Anowar (14 years old)

Embracing the complexities and role of girls’ sexuality within CEFMU

“We need to understand the context of girls and to talk about sexuality, consent and desire.”

The dominant narratives in the CEFMU discourse avoid discussing how patriarchal control of adolescent girls’ and young women’s sexuality acts as a driver of CEFMU, considering it too sensitive. Instead, the dominant narratives have focused on the easier-to-talk-about economic drivers. While simpler to address in the short-term, this does not create long-lasting shifts in girls’ choices and autonomy.

“The lens of gender and sexuality to the CEFMU work is the most significant approach that I feel has made the real difference in the ways it was understood and addressed before. This lens not only questioned the existing approaches of girls’ empowerment (as a good girl) but also center-staged the agency and voices of young people. The sexuality lens allowed for conversations around bodily autonomy and individual choices, layering the analysis of structural barriers and constraints.”

The transformative narratives have brought attention to the glaring absence of comprehensive sex and sexuality dialogue and work in CEFMU. There are emerging spaces actively building evidence and exploring how the fear of girls’ sexuality, sexual activity, and/or pregnancy outside of marriage are interconnected in shaping responses within communities and the field more generally.

These approaches emphasize that families often employ fear as a means of exerting control over girls' sexuality. Furthermore, these narratives shed light on how self-initiated early marriages and unions are sometimes pursued by girls as a way to assert their own sexual agency. The transformative spaces have been exploring and finding ways to tackle and build narratives around the complicated issue of girls' sexuality and CEFMU. The ***CEFMU and sexuality working group's*** efforts to generate learning and documentation of promising practices on this is an example of how narratives are being expanded on the topic.

Backlashes occur when narratives are shifted and so this work requires thoughtful care and nuance. Additionally, while addressing fear and control of girls' sexuality is imperative, unsurprisingly, the actual programming on the issue is difficult. Continued support is needed for collective problem solving via peer learning spaces to grow this area of work.



Photo: Sasithon Pooviriyakul, courtesy of American Jewish World Service



Practice and Policy

Participants reflected on the evolution of the CEFMU field as a whole. They highlighted that there has been a slow and modest shift towards seeing CEFMU as an entry point to expanding girls’ rights and empowerment, rather than an end in itself.

In recent years more efforts seek to better understand and acknowledge the root causes of CEFMU rather than trying to treat the symptom of CEFMU in shallow and simplistic ways.

There has also been a gradual recognition of the diversity of what “child marriage” looks like within and across geographies and the differentiated approaches needed to truly serve the needs of girls globally. The dialogues invited participants to reflect on the praxes that have dominated and the emerging spaces moving toward liberatory and feminist frameworks..



Practice and Policy paradigms (view full-size version online) or page 49

“There is a growing narrative around girls’ resistance, around collectivizing, around the role of girls in movements, girls’ activism, etc. that is moving away from the economic imperative and also away from individual girls as changemakers that so heavily dominate the field.”

Moving beyond the individual

“If the end game is to have young women who are political beings, citizens of a country, not just young girls, who are active in their village ... I think, that's a very troubling thing for any government, and empowering a girl and making a girl go to school is not.”

The dominant paradigm promotes girl-centered programming that tends to be designed by adults for girls. It generally focuses on empowering girls to resist harmful practices and negotiate for their rights at the individual level in order to shift the age of marriage to the legal age. These programs are often siloed within sectors such as education, sexual reproductive health and rights, and economic empowerment as the specific route for girls' empowerment.

While such programs can be valuable, they may not fully capture the perspectives, experiences, and aspirations of girls themselves. It is increasingly recognized that girls have the potential to be powerful agents of change when they are organized and politicized. The transformative paradigms embrace this potential and support girls' collective leadership and movement building by moving from girl-centered to girl-led approaches.

Engaging in truly girl-led programming requires a shift in power dynamics and a willingness to cede control to girls themselves. Adults must listen to girls, trust their judgment, and support their leadership. Overall, the move towards strengthening girls' collective leadership and movement building represents an important shift in the way we think about girls' rights. Girls have the capacity to transform their own lives and communities through their organizing and movement building. It is critical to prioritize this shift and work towards creating a world where girls can exercise their agency and collectivism.

“[We] need to also ensure we are building in safety, wellness, and flexibility that supports girls' agency but also leave space for girls to grow, play, and aspire to alternatives beyond activism. {We also must} ensure mechanisms to support complementarity at community and national levels to reduce the burden of change on girls already enduring the weight of anti-gender actors/ systems and practices.”

Participants also lifted up the need for the creation of an enabling environment to ensure the success of girl-led programming. They spoke about the importance of making sure efforts to support girl-led collective action does not inadvertently place all the burden for change exclusively on girls' shoulders when this is indeed the

"THE MAJOR SHIFT IN APPROACHES IS TO CONSIDER ADOLESCENT GIRLS AS CHANGEMAKERS FOR THEIR OWN COMMUNITY, AS ADVOCATES FOR THEMSELVES."

responsibility of the broader community and society. They emphasized that inspiring girls and supporting their perspective building is a different endeavor from advocating with the government and power holders for environments with better resources and opportunities for girls. Participants also reflected on the need for collective learning spaces on how to best support girl-led efforts and politicized collectivization practices.

Looking beyond age of marriage laws

Age of marriage laws have been a primary focus for CEFMU policy and advocacy. The efforts have included pushing for new laws, programming focused on building awareness of existing laws, and working with communities and institutions to enact the laws and policies as a key approach to stopping child marriage. In many ways, age of marriage focused policy and legal interventions served as a key outcome in the CEFMU field for a long time and in many places this still continues. However, in most countries, the policies are inadequate and fail to address or deliberately evade existing social norms, or do not address informal unions and other practices.

In many contexts, policy and legal interventions are not resourced. This means that laws exist but implementation lags and/or information about laws is limited, especially where there are accessibility gaps (i.e., literacy, language, etc.). In many contexts, these laws lead to increased criminalization and resistance/fear including for girls and parents. Participants reflected on the growing recognition that this focus has not served its intent and explorations are happening to better understand the context-specific benefits, limitations, and sometimes harms of age of marriage laws.

While there is some evidence that age of marriage laws can and are used by civil society organizations (CSOs) and girls to assert their rights, the little evidence that exists in fact shows limited impact at best, and adverse impacts at worst. The true data on the impact of the age of marriage laws is fleeting since the laws also created situations where girls' ages are forged or the criminalization pushes the practice underground. The age of

marriage laws in some instances are intertwined with age of consent laws and this results in grouping together girls across a vast age range, consequently infantilizing, ignoring, and/or bringing a protectionist lens to the complexities of girls' rights and sexual autonomy as they enter adolescence and progress towards young adulthood.

Transformative spaces are consequently exploring nuance in the laws and how they are implemented (e.g. the deep research and advocacy work in India around age of marriage and age of consent laws), and what more holistic laws and policy measures that address the root causes of CEFMU (e.g. laws and policies that ensure equitable rights and access to education, healthcare, inheritance, and essential services for girls) can look like. Within the transformative praxis there are also efforts to involve girls themselves in the development and implementation of policies that impact them. **The need to focus on the well-being and preferences of girls has also highlighted the extent to which married girls are not protected by laws and policies.**

Participants also reflected on the role of alternative justice systems in addressing CEFMU and ensuring girls' rights. This was identified as an area of good trouble. Existing knowledge indicates that successful engagements with these systems require a collaborative approach of working with traditional leaders, community members, and other stakeholders to promote positive attitudes towards girls' rights.



Photo: Sara Hylton, courtesy of American Jewish World Service

From age to agency to actual freedom

“If the objective is to really value the personhood of every individual in a more equal world, then there could be more scope to support young people in accessing freedoms, rather than shift the burden to them to demonstrate what freedom looks like. And I think that is the danger — and to do this while acknowledging the age-specific vulnerabilities girls and boys face.”

Participants reflected on the evolution of the CEFMU field over the last decade as more practitioners and organizations added a focus on building girls’ agency to their approach. This shift has brought “girls rights” into the CEFMU frame and has formulated a debate around “girls” and their empowerment instead of it being about marriage and how to postpone it.

In the dominant paradigm, the approaches to build girls’ agency continue to focus on supporting girls’ agency to postpone marriage till the legal age. While building their ability to delay marriage is very helpful, the transformative paradigm argues that we need to aim further towards their ability to decide whether, with whom and when they choose to marry. This is viewed as one component of their being able to build a life of their choosing.

However, in many contexts where sexual activity outside of marriage is taboo or forbidden, heteronormativity is widespread, education and livelihood options for women and girls are limited, and physical safety is a daily concern. Marriage is less a choice and more an inevitable part of life for most girls. Hence, much of the focus thus far has been on building girls’ agency to, at a minimum, choose when and who they marry.

Participants reflected that while agency is more front-and-center as a priority, it is not a simple topic. In many contexts, girls under the age of 18 choose to get married and often these choices are based on very real and valid desires, needs and concerns. Some “good trouble” areas they felt the field needs to continue collectively grappling with and solving for are:

- ▶ **How do you best support and strengthen the decision-making of young people**, who are still growing up and learning the world? Young people are growing and learning, and it is normal for them to experience age-relevant vulnerabilities that might complicate decision making. If the goal is to truly support choices for girls, there is much thinking and learning from girls that is still needed to understand how to support girls’ choices while being responsive to age-related evolving capacities.

- **How do you support girls beyond age 18? As a field there is a need to think beyond age 18 for girls.** Often programs don't know how to acknowledge and support the transition between girlhood and young adulthood. Young girls grow up and have to tackle new issues, including livelihood opportunities and relationship options; this is often overlooked and not held well by programs.

Beyond instrumentalizing gender

“It is important to introduce gender-transformative approaches and respect at all times the autonomy and agency of the girls and young women. Another specific approach is Comprehensive Sex Education to tackle harmful gender norms and stereotypes.”

“Working with men and boys and masculinities needs more discussion on how to do this well and not in instrumental ways, and lifting up where folks have been able to do this well. There is actual harm because of this where folks are seeing men and boys sitting back and saying, 'Yup this is girls and womens to solve, so let them do it,' and placing even more burdens on them.”

Gender transformative approaches (GTAs) involve addressing power imbalances and transforming social norms and structures to promote gender equity. A large part of the broader CEFMU field has acknowledged the need to go beyond narrow programming approaches that instrumentalize gender to embracing GTAs.

However, participants reflected that the dominant portion of CEFMU work has not actually integrated GTAs. This is partly due to the fact that many funders and organizations have adopted the language surrounding GTAs, but have been slow to engage in the necessary deep reflection required to authentically embody GTAs. This reflection is crucial for meaningful changes in approaches to funding and programming that truly support the implementation of GTAs.

Those in the transformative spaces of the CEFMU field are authentically engaging GTAs with a learning mindset. As a result, many promising practices have emerged and been documented (e.g. [successful comprehensive sexuality education programs and others compiled by the CEFMU and sexuality working group](#)).

Participants highlighted the need and value of having safe spaces to explore and learn how to work through the complexities, challenges, and backlashes of implementing GTAs.

Who is supporting the boys?

One of the challenges emphasized is the issue of engaging men and boys, an area that the field continues to struggle with. While many programs have varying degrees of engagement with men and boys, participants felt that few are truly carrying out gender-synchronized programming. They indicated that this is challenging because supporting work with men and boys while centering girls and women requires meaningful engagement with masculinities work. This involves examining how traditional gender norms and stereotypes affect both men and women and working to create alternative, healthier versions of masculinity that promote gender equality and respect for all genders. This is an area that is underdeveloped in the CEFMU and broader girls' rights discourse.

Beyond the white savior complex

“The colonizing approaches to this work ... every time we are trying to work in a diverse context, we face this challenge ... Once again people from the North coming and telling all the things that we're doing wrong. So how can we really be sensitive to how we can really work together to say, Okay, this is close to some suffering. We need to really talk about this, we need to have that conversation, but not, you know, just repeating or reproducing this white savior speech. So that's really important. That's one thing that I'm facing all the time.”

White savior and neo-colonial approaches to program and policy design have historically perpetuated power imbalances and failed to center the voices and experiences of local communities. This includes CEFMU and girls' rights work, which has been significantly shaped by work led and articulated largely in the Global North. The dominant spaces in the CEFMU field continue to function under these paradigms. Participants noted the need for a decolonial approach that acknowledges the nuanced and intersectional ways that people are already working to solve pressing issues.

Those in the transformative spaces who are exploring decolonial approaches are continuing to face challenges because the funders and broader non-profit ecosystems continue to embody ways of working that do not allow for the time, space, and pace needed to move reflectively with communities in meaningful ways.

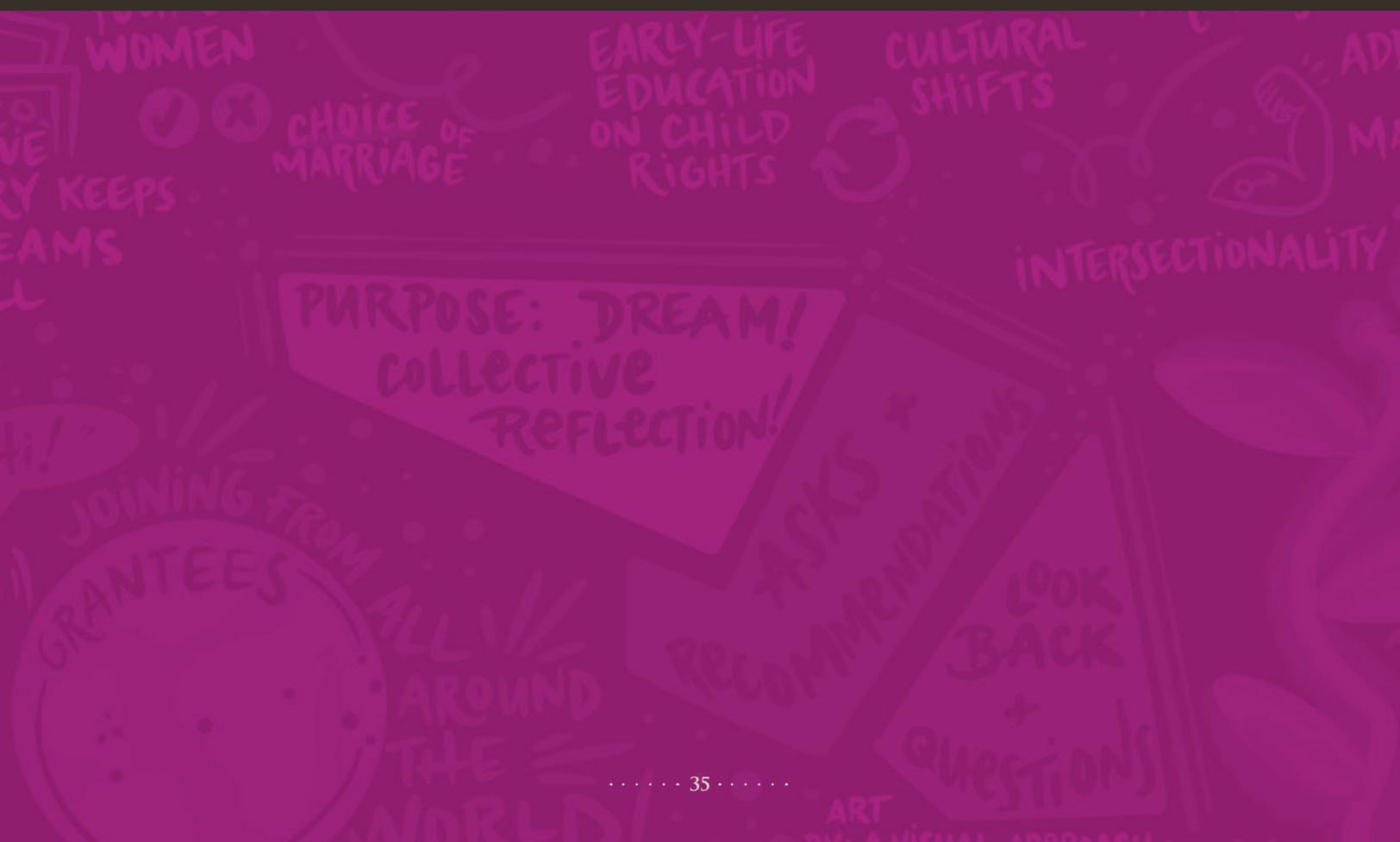
PARTICIPANTS NOTED THE NEED FOR A DECOLONIAL APPROACH THAT ACKNOWLEDGES THE NUANCED AND INTERSECTIONAL WAYS THAT PEOPLE ARE ALREADY WORKING TO SOLVE PRESSING ISSUES.

Participants noted that further exploration and documentation of decolonial approaches is needed, with space to experiment, make mistakes, and learn along the way. This process should be guided by principles of humility, accountability, and a commitment to ongoing learning and growth by embracing more collaborative and community-led approaches, **where the expertise and knowledge of local communities are valued and respected.**





Funding



At the forefront of the girls' rights movement, new ideas, approaches, and expressions are emerging that acknowledge and amplify the agency and power of girls as transformative forces within their own lives and communities. This dynamic space is driven by girls themselves, with the support of a network of movement actors collaborating to bring about systemic change.

"We should allocate resources to make power shifting, resource shifting, and decision-making shifting a reality. This will serve as a best practice for truly centering the voices of girls."

Funding movements and power-shifting work require multiple essential components. Participants emphasized the importance of funders shifting their approach from creating project-focused initiatives to genuinely supporting movement structures and the paradigm shifts that they are ushering into the girls' rights space.



Funding paradigms ([view full-size version online](#)) or [page 49](#)

Move beyond “silver-bullet” solutions

Funders are invited to get behind those promising ideas and strategies that often challenge popular approaches, such as expanded sexuality work that honors the agency of girls. This recommendation emphasizes the importance of recognizing the real costs associated with seeking simplistic solutions, which

"THERE HAS BEEN SUBSTANTIAL FINANCIAL INVESTMENT INTO ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENTS WHICH UNDERMINE GIRLS' RIGHTS GAINS, AND WHICH HASN'T BEEN MET WITH EQUALLY SUBSTANTIAL INVESTMENTS IN GIRLS' RIGHTS MOVEMENTS."

can lead to top-down approaches, overlooking underlying issues, and disregarding the perspectives of those who are actively addressing multiple intersecting problems. The recommendation also calls upon funders to acknowledge the complexity of the challenges at hand, and adopt a multi-issue, multi-community, and multi-generational perspective.

"We still see so much funding and support for girls focused on issue areas/silos, such as education or sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) and not holistic resources and support to girls...girls do not live single-issue lives."

Think intersectionally

Closely related to the above is the invitation to acknowledge the interconnected nature of various forms of discrimination and oppression and take an inclusive approach to funding that operates at the intersections of gender, race, class, and disability. It is crucial for funders to recognize that issues like CEFMU are not isolated problems but symptoms and causes of broader gender inequality. Focusing solely on a project-related approach makes it difficult to apply an intersectional lens and create a holistic and enabling environment. In creating enabling environments, funders are encouraged to move beyond viewing CEFMU as a standalone issue or confining it within specific sectors like education or health. **Girls lead multifaceted lives, and the programming designed to support them must be integrated and multifaceted as well.**

Expand funding horizons

“You need to be really patient, and know you're not going to see any results for many, many years ...”

Funders need to understand that sustainable and transformative change requires a long-term commitment to strategies that address the underlying systems and structures contributing to inequality. Participants highlighted the need to provide long-term funding that is premised on a deep appreciation that systems change will require multiple generations. Funders are asked to provide sustained and flexible resources that meet girls and their organizations where they are, while supporting their journey toward the bigger transformational wins.

Take risks

What does it mean for funders to take risks? Traditionally, the burden of risks has often been placed on partners, particularly girls who step into leadership roles and challenge established systems and approaches.

To genuinely stand with girls and share the risk, funders must demonstrate a willingness to invest in unconventional approaches and prioritize the perspectives and needs of girls and their communities. This involves embracing the inherent uncertainty and complexity of girls' rights work and being open to adaptation and pivoting when necessary. It means making funding flexible, from longer-term program support to short-term emergency grants, including funds designated specifically for safety and protection of girl organizers and human rights defenders.

Ultimately, taking risks entails recognizing that transformative change necessitates challenging the status quo and supporting bold and innovative solutions that place girls' voices and leadership at the center. Our participants remind us that "girls take big risks every day, and we disproportionately place the risk on them." There is collective and necessary work to be done that involves an interrogation of risk-taking, shifting from seeing risk as inherently problematic to viewing it as an opportunity for positive change.

Center the well-being of those at the frontlines

Relatedly, far too many young people and grassroots activists are facing security threats, trauma, financial pressures, and the constant pull to do more. Nurturing the safety and wellbeing of the people who are on the frontlines of this movement is integral to shifting inequitable power relations. Funder support to these frontline actors includes standing in solidarity with girl leaders and co-creating collective care practices within social

change movements. Such efforts combat burnout and cultivate long-term resilience within girls' organizing and civil society spaces. Such efforts also see and honor the people at the very heart of this work.

Reimagine the measures of success

“So much of what girls' work actually looks like needs to be hidden — both because of closing civic space and because of funders' own limitations that require neat frameworks, etc.”

In the field of girls' rights work, there is a growing recognition that the current approach to learning is often limited to short-term program impact evidence. However, many voices are advocating for a paradigm shift in how learning is understood and practiced. This shift is driven by a desire to move beyond narrow indicators of success defined by scale and immediate impact, particularly among bilateral and corporate funders.

Instead, the focus is on reimagining methodologies, indicators, timeframes, and engaging girls as active participants and knowers within the learning process. This includes making space for girls to define their own success, shape learning questions, and determine learning timeframes, recognizing that transformative change necessitates long-term approaches to program and learning design. By shifting the focus from short-term outcomes to longer-term learning journeys, the objective is to prioritize girl-centered accountability through inclusive and participatory learning.

Build trust

“We use various terms like due diligence to describe lack of trust, but at its core, it's simply a lack of trust in people.”

Establishing a culture of trust is vital for advancing transformative girls' rights work, starting with trusting the leadership and voices of girls themselves. Trust has been a longstanding topic of discussion in this field. Fostering a culture of trust involves creating reliable ecosystems and funding structures. And embracing multi-directional accountability approaches, where funders are accountable to partners, encourages open dialogue, learning from mistakes, resolving conflicts, and adapting strategies.

Another vital aspect of trust is recognizing the significance of pace. The process of change takes time. Currently, funders often dictate the pace of work through their two-to-three-year program cycles. But girls grow up, their

Why is it important for funders to avoid appropriating movement language?

Despite using language around transformation and reflection, funders' actions often fail to match their words. Funders need to align their actions with their rhetoric, and take the necessary steps to close the gap between their words and actions.

needs change, they don't live life in two-to-three-year increments. As a primary step, funders are urged to engage partners in adjusting the pace of work by creating space for girls to advise on how funding can support their holistic needs and to move at a pace built on trust.



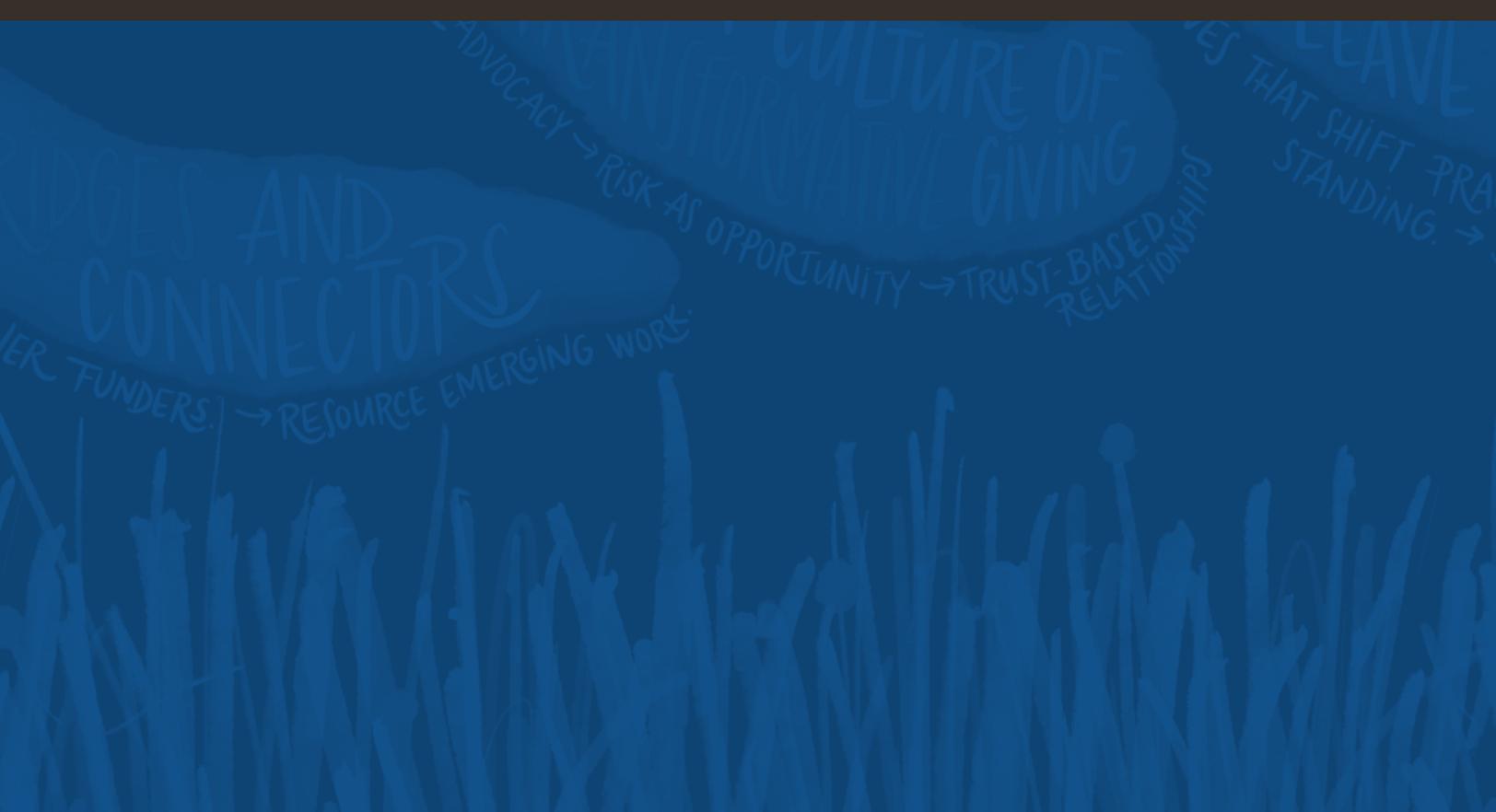
Photo: Deepak Sharma, courtesy of American Jewish World Service

In the current political context, with more funders entering the girls' rights space, including corporate responsibility funders, there is a growing need for funders to adopt more transformative funding models that go beyond traditional grantmaking and take into account the complexities and challenges of the work. Funders must acknowledge the inherent power dynamics between them and grantees, and prioritize building authentic and collaborative relationships with their partners.

By embracing those funding models that prioritize long-term, sustained support, funders will allow for flexibility and adaptability in responding to the changing needs of grantees and the communities they work with. **Ultimately, transformative funding models should aim to create space for experimentation, innovation, and risk-taking, giving space for movement leaders to take bold action and challenge systemic oppression.**



The **Kendada Fund** Approach



The story of the Kendeda Fund is characterized

by its willingness to take bold risks, its collaborative approach with partners, its reflective and learning-oriented stance, and its ability to cultivate trusted relationships. The fund's impact reverberated through the space, reshaping perspectives and driving transformative change.

As participants attested, Kendeda's journey stands as an inspiring example for other funders, highlighting the power of embracing innovation, collaboration, and continuous learning.

Principles of Funding

Participants shared important narratives that highlighted the big impact the Kendeda Fund had on the child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) as well as the girls' rights space and its partners throughout the years. Below are notable highlights:

Took big bets: As one partner eloquently stated, *"What the Kendeda Fund did remarkably well was take big bets—something other funders need to embrace more fervently."* Kendeda Fund fearlessly ventured into uncharted territory, including investing in girls' sexuality work and adapting emerging ideas. They embraced opportunities that others might have shied away from, centering the leadership of girls in the frontlines.

Was shaped by partners: Partners noted Kendeda Fund's ability to evolve through engagement with grantees. As one participant astutely observed, *"The way the fund evolved through its engagement with grantees was nothing short of remarkable."* The fund modeled good partnership as a funder, actively engaging, learning and adapting in collaboration with its partners.

Was reflective and learning: The Kendeda Fund embraced a reflective and learning-oriented stance. Participants emphasized the fund's commitment to sharing its learning and experiences. One participant remarked, *"They harnessed their learnings, using their voice to spark change not just within their own walls but across the entire philanthropic landscape."* The fund actively sought to drive systemic change by leveraging its knowledge and engaging with other foundations and philanthropy institutions.

Trusted partners: The Kendeda Fund's ability to cultivate and maintain trust with its partners was highly regarded. Participants recognized that the fund asked sharp strategic questions while acknowledging its role as a facilitator rather than the sole expert. As one participant noted:

"THEY DEVELOPED TRUST WITH US...BUT SORT OF REALIZED THEY WEREN'T THE EXPERT HERE, AND REALIZED THEY HAD TO BE OPEN AND HOLD THINGS IN A CERTAIN WAY."

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- ▶ Jacyln Gilstrap is a community connector, group facilitator, birth doula, and artist whose work is rooted in deep listening.
- ▶ Hope Tyson is a visual thinker and listener born, raised, and living in Durham, North Carolina with her beloved community.

Design: Ross Hogin Design

- ▶ Ross Hogin is a visual designer working with organizations that try to make the world a better place.



Qualitative questionnaire summary (view full-size version online)



Facilitated dialogues summary (view full-size version online)



Discussions with grantmaking organizations summary (view full-size version online)



A tapestry of freedom dreams (view full-size version online)



Narrative shift paradigms (view full-size version online)



Practice and Policy paradigms (view full-size version online)



Funding paradigms (view full-size version online)



Transformative paradigms (view full-size version online)



LA LIBERTAD DE
LOS SUEÑOS DE
LOS Y LAS NIÑAS

FREEDOM FROM
VIOLENCE

FREEDOM TO BE
DIFFERENT +
HONOR OUR
DIVERSITY

FREEDOM IS
A BIRTHRIGHT;
IT IS ACCESSIBLE TO
EVERYONE
ESSENTIAL
TO LIFE.

FREEDOM TO IMAGINE
TOGETHER THE
FUTURE



THE KENDEDA FUND