

# WHAT WORKS FOR ADOLESCENTS' EMPOWERMENT

*A Learning Review*

Research Brief

Funded by



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## Phases of the Study



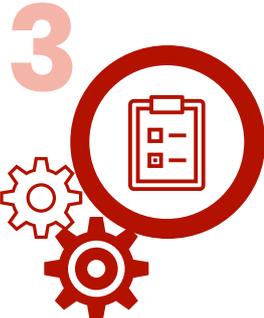
### 1 Desk Research

Review of program documents to understand content, spread, audience and design of the 12 programs.



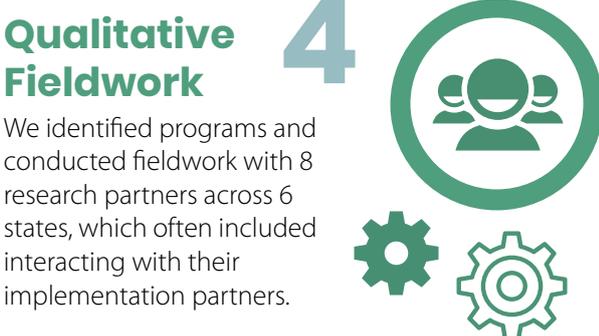
### 2 Formative Meetings

with key representatives from the chosen programs to gather the organizational vision and ideology, etc. and define the scope of research.



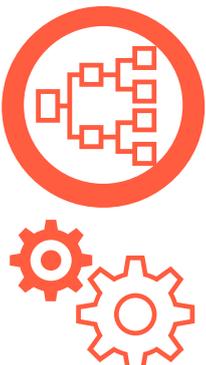
### 3 Literature Review

Review of key knowledge products from global learning platforms, focusing on India after defining the scope of research in phase 2.



### 4 Qualitative Fieldwork

We identified programs and conducted fieldwork with 8 research partners across 6 states, which often included interacting with their implementation partners.



### 5 Data synthesis and consultations

Analysis of 60 narratives from FGDs, IDIs, KIs and 20 key documents received from the research partners. The data was condensed and categorized into 51 themes to synthesize. Ultimately grouped into 9 strategic learnings.

## PROGRAMMING FOR ADOLESCENTS' EMPOWERMENT

Adolescence marks the developmental transition from childhood to adulthood; a time when many important social, economic, biological, and demographic events set the stage for adult life. The nature and quality of young people's future, as well as a country's future social and economic development, depends largely on how well adolescents navigate this transition. Programming for adolescent girls and women has increasingly focused on empowerment approaches. The term **empowerment** made its way into the feminist movement in 1980s.<sup>i</sup> Scholars have also used gender scripts<sup>ii</sup> to further understand how gender is performed in daily lives to unpack theoretical frameworks on the construction of gender and its various implications. This also speaks directly to the kinds of pathways adopted by various kinds of developmental actors, to address the concerns of **disempowerment**. In this context, **empowerment** is seen both as a process and an outcome.

### WHAT DID WE SET OUT TO DO?

Given this context, the **International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)**, with support from the **Ford Foundation**, undertook a learning review focusing on two thematic areas<sup>iii</sup> of programming for adolescent girls with the following objectives:

- To understand the drivers and pathways to solutions adopted for issues identified by the specific projects included in the review
- To understand the organizational ideologies and how these influence organizations adopting certain program strategies
- To explore what remains to be done in the context of creating empowering spaces and identify strategies for sustaining these spaces

## WHAT DID WE LEARN?

We utilized the experiences of the 12 projects<sup>iv</sup> reviewed across six states as examples to explore how certain approaches produce solutions and pathways relevant to their thematic focus. Our key learning emphasizes on how strategies around programming for adolescents have been previously documented and evaluated but often do not reflect the influences of organizational ideologies on the resultant pathways and, ultimately, the outcome. We then synthesized findings from individual projects and their contexts to arrive at a cumulative understanding of strategic learnings highlighted below.<sup>v</sup>

### Organizational Ideologies and Values



Organizational vision, ideologies, values, and perspectives ultimately denote a set of norms and shared understanding that guide the decisions of the organization. These parameters also influence program strategies in the context of adolescent empowerment.

### Mapping and Measurements of Outcomes



Data collection processes should be ground up, participatory approaches to capture the complex construct of empowerment and its inherent components. These processes need much work to be truly representative of and meaningful to the people part of the programs.

### Designing Convergent and Ecological Approaches



The need to engage with key influencers in the ecosystem of adolescents has been greatly emphasized. Along with this, convergent approaches are required for pooling in resources, departments and program strategies to amplify efforts directed toward an issue.

### Unpacking Masculinities



Men and boys often act as key decision-makers in girls' lives. Effective engagement with men and boys provides spaces for them to critically reflect on harmful gender norms. This enhances opportunities for men and boys to be active contributors for creating an enabling ecosystem for girls.

### Building Safe and Collective Spaces



Safe spaces are marked by collective strength and confidentiality. Programs use this majorly for transacting critical information and change processes. The success of safe spaces is dependent on staff who directly engage with adolescents in creating and sustaining them. Hence, investing in their skills, perspectives and motivation is crucial.

### Deepening Agency



There is an increasing awareness to engage on issues of choice, voice and agency, which is critical for navigating sensitive domains such as choice of education, livelihood, experiences of desire, safe and consensual relationships. Programs that invest in developing capacities of young people as peer leaders create role models for adolescent girls and ensure a meaningful engagement.

### Promoting Sports for Empowerment



Sports promotes multiple dimensions of agency building for girls in contexts with rigid gender norms. Sports is cited as a personally invigorating and empowering experience, which provides access to public spaces, physical training and builds abilities for better communication, negotiations and decision-making. Sports has proven to be effective in building confidence and promoting body positivity for young girls.

### Prioritizing Girls' Aspirations



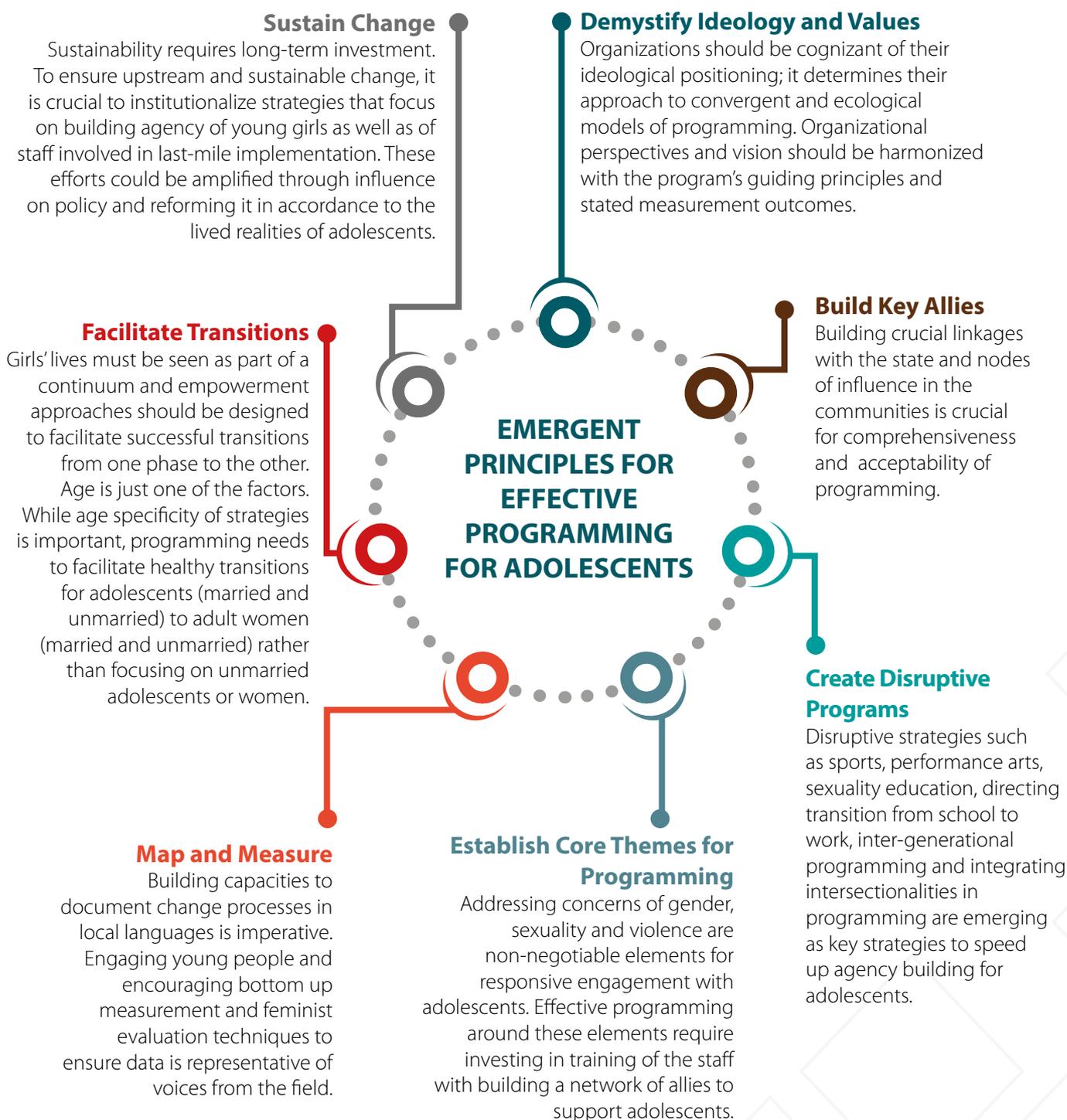
Attaining Higher education, receiving skill training, participating in formal work, having freedom of mobility in public spaces, marrying by choice are some of the aspirations consistently voiced by girls. Adolescent programs that encompass some of these into their design are able to connect better to the realities of girls' lives.

### Addressing the Fear of Everyday Violence



Fear of violence is immense for families, communities and girls at large, and often used as a tool to control and police girls to reinforce gender norms. Program designs constantly navigate this impending fear of violence and backlash. However, there is scope for engaging more deeply with the "everydayness" of violence in the lives of girls.

The critical learnings from the study point to the need for comprehensive ecological approaches for engaging with adolescent girls to enhance their voice and agency, and to amplify the scope for sustaining change across thematic and geographical areas.<sup>vi</sup> Based on the strategies that emerged from our primary engagement with implementing organizations, supplemented by our review of evidence from other contexts, we drew further linkages between our primary learnings and emerging global discourses. We recommend the following key principles for programs working with adolescent to reflect upon during design, implementation and measurement processes.



## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Sharma, A. (2008). *Logics of Empowerment: Development, Gender, and Governance in Neoliberal India*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Desai, S., & Andrist, L. (2010)*. Suggest that the notion of gender scripts drawn from performance theory in sociology of culture, allows us to understand how gender is performed by men and women through a limited set of behaviors within a given ideological framework and how rituals (such as in marriage), create visible displays of gender.
- <sup>iii</sup> The two thematic areas were early, child and forced marriage and support for strengthening the SABLA scheme for adolescent girls.
- <sup>iv</sup> **Organizations included in the review – For Early, Child and Forced Marriage:** Breakthrough India, HAQ Child Rights Centre (HAQ CRC), MAMTA-Health Institute for Mother and Child (MAMTA- HIMC), Area Network and Development Initiatives (ANANDI), Centre for Reproductive Rights (CRR), Women's Fund Asia (WFA) and Women Power Connect (WPC). **For Strengthening SABLA Implementation:** Sahayog: Society for Participatory Rural Development (Sahayog), Child in Need Institute (CINI), SAHAJ Society for Health Alternatives (SAHAJ), Jagori Rural and Centre for Catalyzing Change (C3).
- <sup>v</sup> We would like to acknowledge that this research is not exhaustive nor illustrative of the totality of the programs and organizations. Nevertheless, it yields important findings that can be built upon and strengthened in future work in this area. Some of the limitations encountered helped build the recommendations section and can shed important light on what else is needed for donors, program implementers and researchers, among other stakeholders.
- <sup>vi</sup> More details on the learnings (strategies and sub strategies along with an indicative list of approaches within each), that seemed to have done well and those that leave room for improvement are contained in our research report

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Cover Photo: Girls indulge in humor during an adolescent girls' group gathering in Gujarat, India. A scene from the film, *Parwaaz | Flight* (2019), produced by ICRW Asia and directed by Mixed Media Productions.

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