Beyond Empowerment:

How Adolescent Girls Become Changemakers and What It Takes to Sustain Their Leadership?



Executive
SUMMARY

Adolescent girls across Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are growing up in contexts where gender norms continue to shape their mobility, education, safety, choices and participation in public life. Programmes have responded through life-skills education, safe spaces, peer groups, leadership activities, education support and livelihood-oriented interventions. The evidence reviewed for this brief shows that these approaches can help girls build knowledge, confidence and the ability to make decisions. But individual confidence alone does not produce lasting change. Girls' agency becomes consequential when it is supported by relationships and institutions that take them seriously: peers who build solidarity; families that negotiate rather than restrict; teachers and mentors who encourage; community leaders who respond; and public systems that make participation meaningful. When girls act together, they can move from raising personal concerns to identifying community problems, negotiating with local authorities, challenging gendered expectations and creating collective platforms. The qualitative study informing this brief mapped 7 organisations and programme models and included seven organisations. It draws on interviews and group discussions with organisational eaders, programme staff, adolescent girls and girl leaders, parents and community leaders.

The findings offer insights into participating models, not all programmes or causal impact. This brief presents five policy propositions:



Recognise girls as decision-makers and co-creators, not only as programme participants.



Invest in sustained, gender-transformative safe spaces and pathways from adolescent participation to young women's leadership.



Make families, schools, communities and public institutions accountable for enabling and responding to girls' agency.



Strengthen the capacity, mentoring and wellbeing of facilitators and peer leaders who support girls' leadership.



Measure and fund change in agency, relationships, collective action and institutional responsiveness not only programme reach.

THE POLICY SHIFT:

Move from programmes that empower individual girls to ecosystems in which girls can exercise agency, build collective power and influence institutions.



From Empowerment to LEADERSHIP

Adolescence is a critical period for shaping identity, aspirations, relationships and life choices. Yet girls' opportunities are not determined by individual ability or motivation alone. The research report describes persistent inequalities linked to gender, class and geography, including restrictions on mobility and decision-making, child marriage, unequal investment in education, household responsibilities, safety concerns and barriers to secondary-school retention. The policy landscape already includes programmes and institutions concerned with adolescent health, education, protection and development. The study notes that adolescent clubs, peer groups and youth forums can provide platforms for confidence, leadership and participation. However, implementation is uneven, leadership development can remain peripheral, and girls are not always engaged as active agents in shaping decisions and solutions.

The study's programme mapping identified both school-based and community-based approaches. School-based models can connect with formal education systems and influence school environments. Community-based models can mobilise families, local leaders and collective platforms beyond school hours. The evidence suggests that these approaches can complement one another; neither should be treated as a universal model for every context.

WHAT THE STUDY EXAMINDED

- **Geography:**
  Telangana and Andhra Pradesh
- **Programme mapping:**
  Ten organisations identified and contacted; seven consented to participate
- **Design:**
  Qualitative study of programme design, implementation, enablers, barriers and perceived outcomes
- **Methods:**
  Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and small group discussions
- **Respondent groups:**
  Organisational leadership and management, programme staff, adolescent girls, girl leaders, parents and community leaders
- **Evidence base:**
  11 leadership/management IDIs; 10 programme-team discussions; 13 discussions with adolescent girls; 8 IDIs with girl leaders; 8 parent discussions; 5 community-leader discussions

A note on the evidence: The findings are qualitative and draw on seven participating organisations. They illuminate experiences, promising practices and implementation challenges, but do not establish that a particular intervention caused a particular outcome. The brief therefore uses phrases such as "girls reported", "the study observed" and "participating models demonstrated".

The CONTEXT

Despite improvements in girls' education and women's empowerment, adolescent girls in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh continue to face significant constraints linked to early marriage, discontinuation of education and restricted life choices.

The latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6, 2023–24) shows that 17.9% of women aged 20–24 in Telangana and 25.1% in Andhra Pradesh were married before the age of 18. The rural–urban divide is particularly striking: the prevalence was 19.6% in rural Telangana compared with 12.9% in urban areas, and 28.9% in rural Andhra Pradesh compared with 17.1% in urban areas. Adolescent pregnancy also remains a concern: 6% of girls aged 15–19 in Telangana and 9.2% in Andhra Pradesh were already mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey. These figures point to the continuing influence of social expectations around marriage, sexuality and girls' transitions into adulthood.

Education remains an important pathway to expanding girls' choices, but the transition to and continuation through secondary education require greater attention. According to UDISE+ 2024–25, the secondary-level dropout rate among girls was 10.7% in Telangana and 12.5% in Andhra Pradesh, compared with the national rate of 9.6%. The NFHS-6 also shows that only 51.1% of women aged 15–49 in Telangana and 48.4% in Andhra Pradesh had completed 10 or more years of schooling. While these indicators cover broader age groups and should not be interpreted as direct measures of current adolescent girls' experiences, they highlight persistent gaps in educational progression.

For many girls, decisions about continuing education are shaped not only by access to schools, but also by household resources, safety, mobility, care responsibilities and family expectations. These constraints are not simply the result of individual or family attitudes; they are reinforced by the social and institutional environments in which girls grow up. Their ability to participate, make choices and exercise leadership depends on whether families support their aspirations, schools provide safe and enabling environments, communities recognise their contributions, and local institutions respond to their concerns. At the same time, the Echidna research documents girls questioning unequal expectations, negotiating with parents, organising with peers and approaching local authorities to address community concerns. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to build girls' confidence or awareness, but to create an enabling ecosystem in which their agency can translate into collective action, influence and sustained leadership.

What Does It Take for Girls to Become **CHANGEMAKERS?**

Most models in the study highlighted the value of girls-only, gender-transformative safe spaces. These spaces are more than venues for information sessions. They can provide non-judgmental and confidential settings where girls discuss discrimination, safety and rights; build knowledge and life skills; develop trust and peer relationships; access mentors and referrals; and practise expressing opinions, making decisions and taking collective action. Girls also described the importance of trusted mentors, peer leaders and community volunteers.

These relationships can strengthen emotional security and help girls navigate family and institutional barriers.

The study also identifies a gap: facilitators and peer leaders may themselves carry internalised gender biases or experience emotional distress when supporting girls who have faced violence. Continuous gender-sensitive training, supervision and trauma-informed support are therefore essential.

Protect girls-only spaces as a core component of the model. Engage boys and men as important stakeholders in gender transformation, while being deliberate about when, how and in which settings mixed-gender engagement takes place.



From Individual Agency to **COLLECTIVE ACTION**

Girls' leadership becomes transformative when the confidence and agency developed by individual girls create the conditions for collective action.

The process often begins with girls recognising unequal treatment, questioning restrictive expectations and making choices about their own lives. Through regular peer meetings, safe spaces and collective reflection, they begin to recognise that many of the challenges they experience are shared.

They learn to articulate concerns, listen to different perspectives, identify common priorities and act together. Peer solidarity becomes an important bridge between individual agency and collective power.

The experiences documented in the research illustrate how this transition takes shape. Girls move from discussing concerns within their groups to identifying problems in their communities, approaching decision-makers and seeking solutions.

In one participating model, 15–20 young women came together to raise concerns about poor street lighting, damaged roads and overflowing drainage with local authorities.

One girl described how the process encouraged her to identify problems independently:

> *"Madam V asked me in the beginning what I wanted. I said that the street lights are not correct, the roads are not correct, and the drainage is not correct. The water is always overflowing. At that time, madam V made me write the letter. Around 15–20 members of the YUW went to the PS, submitted it, and came back. Later, we also made requests for CCTV cameras in the area. She did not directly tell me about CCTV cameras. She only asked if there were any problems in society. I identified the problems myself and told her."*
>
> ***— Girl, FGD, Model A***

Collective action also enables girls to challenge gender norms and claim space in community life.

In one village, girls faced ridicule when they sought to hoist the national flag. When the sarpanch did not respond positively, they approached ward members, who intervened on their behalf. As one girl recalled:

> *"Those brothers used to say… 'you are girls…will you hoist the flag?' …all this sarcasm… Later, when we approached the sarpanch, he didn't respond properly. When he didn't respond, we decided to hoist the flag using at least a small container. After deciding, we went to ward members and others, who pressured the sarpanch to accept this. Then he gave us some place for this flag hoisting."*
>
> ***— Girl, FGD, Model C***

These experiences can also change how communities perceive girls and their leadership.

A girl from the same model reflected on the recognition that collective participation had brought:

> *"Only after we attended these meetings did we get an identity. Our village people believe that girls can do anything. If we say that girls can do anything, the first thing they remind us about is us… Recently, the police came and said that children are taking drugs. They invited us to a meeting and asked us to tell them if there were any problems. We told them our problems and solved them."*
>
> ***— Girl, FGD, Model C***



The role of organisations and programme leaders is important in enabling this shift, but the intention must be to support girls to own and lead their collective platforms rather than remain dependent on programme structures. A leader from Model A described this ambition:

> *"The girls on their own are now negotiating their spaces, safety, whether it is a workplace, whether it is a public place, whether it is a place in their own house. So, in any project, in any program, if I see it only as a project mode, it will only end as a project mode. That is what my objectives are. But if we actually start working on sustainability during that entire program, when I have the funding, we took that opportunity to win, these women were collectivized, they started leading their own programs and campaigns."*
>
> ***— Organisation leader, IDI, Model A***

The research also documents the formation of Telangana Aadapillala Samanatva Samakhya (TASS), a federation of Kishori Balika Sanghas across five districts in Telangana.

> *"Participants from 4–5 districts will be there, we get to know the types of issues they are going through and will be shared by them in front of everyone, similarly, we will share what we are doing and what we are achieving through this program… Likewise, we formed a group and discussed that we need this TASS. The discussions, like budget meetings and press meetings, all will happen through that (TASS) group."*
>
> ***— Girl, FGD, Model C***

The significance of such platforms lies in their potential to outlast individual projects and create spaces where girls can set agendas, build alliances and represent their concerns on wider platforms.

A leader from Model A emphasised that sustainability depends on young women taking ownership and continuing to lead campaigns and build networks.

The study also found that only three of the seven participating models had intentional strategies to support women's networking and collectivisation. This suggests that collective leadership cannot be left to emerge incidentally; it needs to be deliberately supported through programme design, resources and institutional linkages.

The movement from individual agency to collective action is neither automatic nor linear. Girls need sustained opportunities to organise, take decisions, lead initiatives and engage with institutions. They also need networks that can continue beyond the duration of a funded project, and adults and institutions that recognise their legitimacy and respond to their demands.

The measure of leadership, therefore, is not only whether a girl can speak for herself, but whether girls can come together, shape the issues that affect them and influence the systems around them.

Collective leadership cannot be left to emerge incidentally; it needs to be deliberately supported through programme design, resources and institutional linkages.



The Ecosystem Around **GIRLS**

Girls cannot be expected to transform unequal systems on their own. While girls' agency, confidence and leadership are important starting points, their ability to exercise these meaningfully depends on the environment around them. Families, schools, teachers, communities, boys and men, civil society organisations and government institutions all shape the opportunities available to girls, the choices they can make and the extent to which their voices are heard and acted upon. The study demonstrates that girls' leadership develops through relationships and interactions with people and institutions around them. It also shows that the ecosystem is not always enabling: some actors support girls' participation, while others reinforce restrictions on their mobility, decision-making and public presence.



Fig 01: Ask what can we name it

FAMILIES:
Shifting expectations and enabling choices

Families are often the first space in which girls negotiate agency. Parents and caregivers influence whether girls can continue their education, travel, attend programmes, participate in community activities and make decisions about their futures.

The study highlights the importance of engaging families, particularly mothers, in building acceptance of girls' leadership. However, family engagement must go beyond securing permission for girls to participate; it should encourage a shift in expectations about girls' capabilities and rights.

One girl described how participation in a programme helped her question unequal treatment at home:

> *"After coming to the resource center, I started questioning why my brother had more freedom than me. I told my parents we are equal, and they began to understand. Now, they give me more importance, allow me to attend seminars, and feel proud of me."*
>
> *— Girl, in-depth interview, Model E*

This account illustrates how a girl's growing awareness can influence relationships within her family. It also highlights the importance of creating opportunities for girls to question unequal norms and negotiate change in their everyday lives.

SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS:

Moving beyond access to meaningful participation

Schools and colleges are important spaces for developing girls' confidence, leadership and collective identities. Teachers and institutional leaders can either reinforce gender stereotypes or create opportunities for girls to question, participate and influence decisions. School-based programmes can also connect gender-transformative work with formal education systems, committees and institutional practices. The study identifies the value of structured opportunities for girls to come together, express their views and participate in collective decision-making. As one girl explained:

> *"We all have to gather. We each have to express our opinions. If we express ourselves, only then we get to know others' thoughts too."*
>
> *— Girl, Model C*

This underscores the importance of spaces where girls are not merely present but are encouraged to express opinions, listen to one another and shape decisions. Schools need to make such participation part of their everyday culture rather than limiting it to occasional programme activities.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL INSTITUTIONS:

Responding to girls as stakeholders

Community leaders, local self-government institutions, police and other public authorities play a critical role in determining whether girls can translate their concerns into action.

The study documents instances where girls approached local authorities, raised community issues and negotiated for change. In one instance, girls challenged the assumption that flag-hoisting was not an activity for them:

> *"Those brothers used to say… 'you are girls… will you hoist the flag?' …all this sarcasm… Later, when we approached the sarpanch, he didn't respond properly. When he didn't respond, we decided to hoist the flag using at least a small container. After deciding, we went to ward members and others, who pressured the sarpanch to accept this. Then he gave us some place for this flag hoisting."*
>
> *— Girls FGD, Model C*

The example shows that girls' leadership involves not only challenging discriminatory attitudes but also navigating local power structures and building alliances to secure a response.

In another instance, girls described how their participation in community meetings helped them gain recognition and engage with the police:

"Only after we attended these meetings did we get an identity. Our village people believe that girls can do anything. If we say that girls can do anything, the first thing they remind us about is us… Recently, the police came and said that children are taking drugs. They invited us to a meeting and asked us to tell them if there were any problems. We told them our problems and solved them."

— Girls FGD, Model C

These experiences suggest that community institutions can become important platforms for girls' participation when they recognise girls as people who can identify problems and contribute to solutions.

BOYS AND MEN:

Sharing responsibility for gender transformation

Gender inequality cannot be addressed by asking girls alone to challenge discriminatory norms. Boys and men, including fathers, brothers, male teachers and community leaders must also be part of the process. The study notes that some programmes engage boys and recognise their role in promoting gender equality, but also identifies limited engagement with fathers, male community leaders and boys as a gap. The resistance girls encountered around flag-hoisting illustrates why this engagement matters. Boys and men need opportunities to question gender stereotypes, reflect on power and privilege, and develop more equitable relationships. At the same time engaging boys and men should not dilute the importance of girls-only spaces, which allow girls to build solidarity, discuss sensitive concerns and develop leadership.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS:

Building pathways from participation to collective leadership

Civil society organisations play an important role in creating safe spaces, supporting girls through mentors and facilitators, engaging families and communities, and connecting girls with institutions. Their role, however, should extend beyond delivering time-bound activities. Organisations need to invest in sustained networks and platforms through which girls can continue to organise and lead beyond the duration of a project. A programme leader from Model A described this aspiration:

"The girls on their own are now negotiating their spaces, safety, whether it is a workplace, whether it is a public place, whether it is a place in their own house. So, in any project, in any program, if I see it only as a project mode, it will only end as a project mode. That is what my objectives are. But if we actually start working on sustainability during that entire program, when I have the funding, we took that opportunity to win, these women were collectivized, they started leading their own programs and campaigns."

Leader IDI, Model A

GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC SYSTEMS:

Institutionalising girls' participation

Government institutions must recognise girls not simply as recipients of services but as participants in decisions that affect their lives.

Schools, local governance bodies, and departments responsible for education, health, women and child development, skills and child protection can create regular opportunities for girls to raise concerns and influence decisions.

This requires accessible platforms, responsive officials and clear mechanisms for following up on girls' recommendations.

The examples of girls engaging with sarpanches, ward members and police demonstrate the possibilities when public institutions respond to their voices. However, such engagement should not depend only on individual officials or the presence of an NGO. It needs to become part of routine institutional practice.

FUNDERS AND PRIVATE SECTOR

Predictable funding, scholarships, transport, market-relevant skills, employment pathways and support for learning and evaluation can help girls sustain participation and move into young adulthood.

THE POLICY IMPLICATION:

Shared responsibility for change

The study highlights that girls' leadership requires an ecosystem of shared responsibility. Girls need space and resources to lead, families must support their choices, schools enable participation, communities recognise their contributions, boys and men challenge unequal norms, civil society sustain collective platforms, and government institutions respond to their concerns. Success is measured not only by girls' confidence and knowledge, but also by whether surrounding relationships and institutions change and girls can continue influencing decisions beyond the programme.



What Makes a Programme Gender **TRANSFORMATIVE?**

The study analyses programme models through five principles drawn from MacArthur et al. (2022). These principles offer a practical test for whether programmes are shifting power and systems, rather than only improving access or individual knowledge.

01.
Be motivated towards profound gender transformation

02.
Focus on systems that perpetuate inequalities

03.
Be grounded in strategic gender interests

04.
Recognise and value diverse identities

05.
Embrace transformative methodological practices

Fig 02: Five Gender Transformative Principles

01. Be motivated towards profound gender transformation

Pursue deep and long-term shifts in norms, power relations and systems. Short project cycles and fragmented funding can undermine this ambition.

02. Focus on systems that perpetuate inequalities

Work across girls, families, communities, organisations and the enabling environment. Girls' leadership cannot be built in isolation.

03. Be grounded in strategic gender interests

Address immediate needs while also challenging the unequal power relations that produce them. Help girls change the system, not only cope with it.

04. Recognise and value diverse identities

Adapt approaches to caste, class, religion, geography, education, disability and other dimensions of exclusion. The study notes that trans and gender-nonconforming identities remain largely invisible in many models.

05. Embrace transformative methodological practices

Make research, monitoring and programme design participatory, reflexive and action-oriented. Girls should help shape the questions, interpret evidence and co-create solutions.

What Gets in the **WAY?**

The study identifies barriers beyond operational challenges; they shape girls' ability to participate, build relationships and sustain collective action.

Human resources & programme quality

Difficulty recruiting and retaining capable staff; gaps in gender knowledge, facilitation skills and commitment; limited capacity to respond to complex community dynamics.

Institutional & structural constraints

Weak networks and alliances; bureaucratic hurdles; political resistance; inconsistent government support; limited access to higher education; competing demands on schools.

Sustainability and continuity

Financial constraints and fragmented funding; girls moving after age 18 for college, work or marriage; attrition; limited long-term engagement and challenges adapting to changing needs.

Family and community barriers

Parental resistance, concerns about safety and mobility, entrenched gender norms, and resistance to topics such as sexuality and reproductive health.

Participation and engagement

Irregular attendance, low motivation, competing responsibilities and challenges engaging adolescents, including boys, through approaches that are not relevant to their interests.

The study also highlights the challenge of sustaining girls' participation as they transition from adolescence into adulthood.

Movement to college, marriage, work and other locations can weaken peer networks and disrupt continued engagement.

This makes transition planning and alumni or young women's networks important, rather than treating programme completion as the end of the leadership pathway.

Recommendations

The recommendations below translate the study's findings into actions for the actors who shape girls' opportunities. They are intended to be mutually reinforcing: girls' leadership requires coordinated action, not a collection of disconnected activities.

1. Recognise girls as decision-makers and co-creators

Girls should help define priorities, shape programme content, identify community issues and assess whether institutions respond. Participation should involve influence—not simply attendance or consultation.

- **Government and local governance:** Create regular, safe and accessible opportunities for adolescent girls and young women to raise issues in local planning and relevant public forums. Establish clear processes for receiving, referring and responding to their concerns.

- **Schools and colleges:** Enable girls to shape school and college practices through meaningful committees, student forums and leadership roles. Make sure girls' recommendations receive a response.

- **Civil society:** Involve girls in programme design, implementation review and decision-making. Support girl-led initiatives and collective campaigns, with appropriate safeguarding and mentoring.

- **Funders:** Recognise girls' decision-making power and collective action as programme outcomes. Resource participation, not only service delivery.

2. Invest in sustained gender-transformative safe spaces and leadership pathways

Safe spaces should provide continuity from knowledge and critical reflection to peer solidarity, leadership practice, collective action and young women's networks.

- **Government:** Strengthen and connect adolescent platforms across education, health, protection and community development systems. Support continuity as girls move from school to college and work.

- **Schools and colleges:** Create gender-sensitive environments, ensure safe and usable facilities, and provide opportunities for girls to participate in decisions and develop leadership.

- **Civil society:** Maintain girls-only spaces that are confidential and non-judgmental. Build pathways from adolescent groups to peer leadership, alumni circles, federations and young women's collectives.

- **Funders:** Provide multi-year, flexible funding that supports sustained engagement, transition planning and collective platforms rather than short-term activity cycles.

3. Make families, communities and institutions responsive to girls' voices

Girls should not carry the burden of changing patriarchal systems alone. Adults and institutions must take responsibility for enabling agency and responding to concerns.

- **Government departments:** Strengthen coordination across education, women and child development, health, skills, child protection and local governance. Clarify referral pathways and institutional accountability.

- **Schools:** Train teachers and school leaders to recognise gender bias, respond to girls' concerns and avoid practices that restrict girls' participation or aspirations.

- **Civil society:** Engage parents, mothers, fathers, community leaders and local institutions in dialogue on girls' education, mobility, safety and leadership. Work with boys and men as allies while retaining protected spaces for girls.

- **Police and child-protection systems:** Build safe, accessible and age-appropriate channels through which girls can seek help, report concerns and participate in community safety discussions.

- **Funders:** Support partnerships and coordination across community organisations and public systems, including referral networks and joint problem-solving.

4. Strengthen the capacity and wellbeing of facilitators and peer leaders

The quality of relationships with mentors and facilitators is a key enabler. Those who support girls need accurate knowledge, strong facilitation skills and sustained support.

- **Government and education systems:** Provide ongoing gender-sensitisation and practical training for teachers and frontline workers, with mechanisms for refresher learning and accountability.

- **Civil society:** Recruit and retain gender-sensitive facilitators; provide continuous training, mentoring and supervision; strengthen peer-leader preparation; and establish confidential spaces for emotional support and trauma-informed care.

- **Funders:** Include staff development, supervision, safeguarding and facilitator wellbeing as essential programme costs rather than optional overheads.

5. Measure and fund change beyond programme reach

Monitoring should capture whether girls are gaining influence and whether the systems around them are changing not only how many girls attended sessions.

- **Government:** Track adolescent participation, institutional response to girls' concerns, school safety and access to services. Use evidence to improve coordination and accountability.

- **Schools and colleges:** Monitor girls' participation in decision-making, leadership opportunities, continuation in education and whether concerns raised by students are acted upon.

- **Civil society:** Measure changes at individual, relational and structural levels. Track peer networks, girl-led action, engagement with decision-makers, referrals and institutional responses over time.

- **Funders:** Provide predictable, longer-term funding and support monitoring, evaluation and learning. Value depth, continuity and institutional change alongside reach and scale.

Connect leadership to education and economic opportunity

The study points to the importance of linking education retention with employability, career guidance and livelihood pathways. It recommends scholarships, transport and other support to enable girls to continue higher education, alongside market-relevant skills and employment opportunities. These supports matter because girls' choices and bargaining power are shaped by their access to resources and viable futures not only by their confidence.

WHAT SHOULD CHANGE AND HOW SHOULD PROGRESS BE RECOGNISED?

A stronger measurement approach would follow change across the three connected dimensions identified in the study.

The indicators below are suggested for policy and programme design; they are not validated measures from the study.

Agency

What to look for: Girls' knowledge, confidence, choices and ability to act

Illustrative indicators: Girls report greater ability to express views, make decisions, seek support, negotiate education or mobility choices, and identify problems.

Relationships

What to look for: Changes in peer solidarity, family support and adult responses

Illustrative indicators: Girls' groups and networks continue; families support girls' education and mobility; teachers and mentors respond constructively; girls can identify trusted adults.

Structures and institutions

What to look for: Collective action, institutional responsiveness and changes in norms or practices

Illustrative indicators: Girl-led issues are taken up in public forums; authorities respond to representations; school or community practices change; girls' collectives participate in decisions.

Measurement should combine girls' experiences with evidence of institutional and community-level change. It should also capture intersecting forms of exclusion and involve girls in interpreting findings and defining progress.

Conclusion

The programme models examined in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh show that girls can question unequal expectations, negotiate with families, organise with peers, identify problems in their communities and engage with local institutions. These experiences are important not only for the individual girls involved. They demonstrate what becomes possible when girls have sustained spaces to learn and act, relationships that support their choices, and opportunities to influence decisions beyond the programme setting.

But the responsibility for change cannot rest with girls alone. Families must recognise their agency; schools and colleges must support their participation; community institutions must respond; government systems must create pathways for meaningful engagement; civil society must sustain collective platforms; and funders must invest for the long term. Girls' leadership should be understood not as a temporary programme outcome, but as a capacity and a form of collective power that public systems have a responsibility to enable.

We do not just need more programmes that empower girls. We need families, communities, institutions and public systems that recognise girls' leadership, respond to their voices and create the conditions for their collective power to transform society.



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