



Girls First Fund

ANNUAL REPORT 2024-2025



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our work at the Girls First Fund continues to be defined by our unwavering dedication to community-led, gender-transformative change, and a commitment to meeting our partners where they are and providing the collaboration and support that they need as they evolve. This is especially important for us in the context of an increasingly challenging global environment, marked by significant reductions in funding and anti-gender equality backlash.

In the past year, we sustained our support to community-based organizations working to end child marriage, through our trust-based FundingPlus model. We expanded our geographic footprint, with the second cohort of our Changemakers program establishing our presence in a total of 24 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America & the Caribbean. We dedicated time and resources to strengthening our internal operations and making our processes more efficient. We deepened our learning about - and alongside - our grantee partners and the communities they serve. And we explored opportunities for more collaboration with other peer actors in the ecosystem to end child marriage.

In the current reality, our partners continue to demonstrate strong leadership and innovation to sustain the gains they have made. They are changing norms, protecting girls and supporting them to dream of better futures. This year, their collective efforts led to the prevention of more than 900 cases of child marriage and with each case, we are reminded that these are not just numbers. These are real lives, real stories,

real people being supported to experience a life of freedom, agency, and choice for themselves... and for the generations after them. We have a responsibility to keep supporting the work that enables this change.

The lessons we have learnt and the successes we have registered over the years directly inform our future. This year, we completed a robust strategic review process and are preparing to share our new 10-year organizational strategy in 2026. This ambitious plan will guide our efforts to deepen our support for community-led efforts to end child marriage, elevate our learning practices, and nurture the collective power of our partners, while opening us up to deeper collaboration within the ecosystem and bigger investments in community-led work.

We stand ready to meet the urgency of the current moment, to share the lessons we are learning, and to continue celebrating the positive transformations we are seeing in communities across the world for girls today and for the future.



OUR GRANTMAKING IN NUMBERS

Nearly 9 out of every 10 grantee partners funded by GFF are led by women or girls

86%

of grantee partners in focus countries are led by women or girls

100%

of grantee partners in Changemakers cohort are led by women or girls

Nearly two-thirds of grantee partners funded by GFF are CBOs

67%

of grantee partners in focus countries are local Community Based Organisations

27%

are locally-focused national organizations

2%

are locally-focused sub-national organizations

4%

are other types of partners (networks, collectives etc.)

58%

of grantee partners in Changemakers cohort are locally-focused national organizations

25%

of grantee partners in Changemakers cohort are Community Based Organisations

17%

are locally-focused sub-national organizations.

Grant range by focus country and changemakers:

US\$10,200 – US\$62,193

for Focus Countries

US\$46,000 – US\$109,984

for Changemakers

Average annual grant size by focus country and changemakers

US\$31,607

for Focus Countries

US\$85,691

for Changemakers



48%

of grantee partners indicated that they joined a new network, coalition, or collective this year

55%

of grantee partners indicated that they prevented instances of child marriage, totaling **970 cases averted**

61%

of grantee partners indicated that they have raised additional funding, totaling **US \$4,203,997**

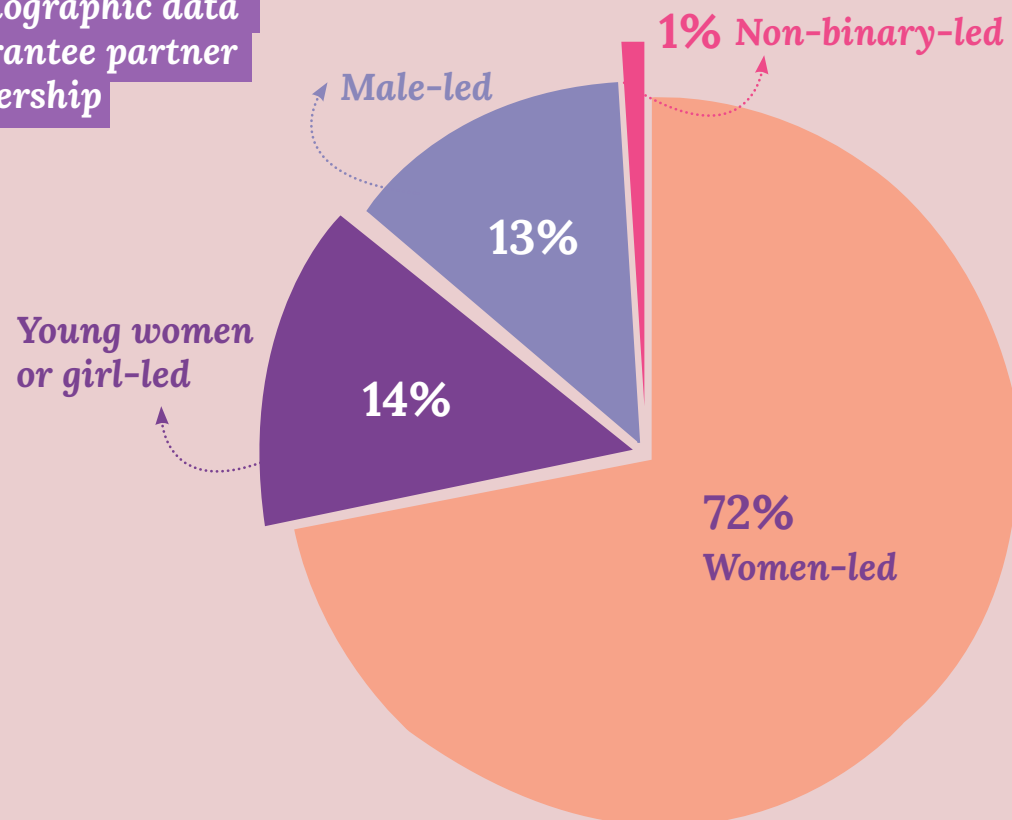
100%

of grantee partners who acknowledged receiving mentoring and accompaniment support said that it provided them with knowledge and/or increased ability to advance their organization's operations and programs

23%

of grantee partners reported that they influenced positive changes in new or existing laws and policies that impact girls and child marriage

Demographic data
of grantee partner
leadership





A JOURNEY OF LEARNING WITH OUR PARTNERS

At the Girls First Fund (GFF), we approach learning as a transformative practice that strengthens our ability to make informed, value-aligned decisions, and deepens our accountability to the organizations, communities, girls, and movements we support.

This year, we built a new comprehensive learning framework to be more explicit on what we aim to learn and how we work with grantee partners and girls to do it. We also kicked off a deeper process of reimagining our learning as part of our strategy refresh. In early 2026, we will launch an updated theory of change that is more ambitious in learning for and with our grantee partners, our team, and our donors and broader ecosystem, and to update our learning framework and processes accordingly. This new strategy calls out learning as one of the three key pillars we will embrace over the next 10 years, and makes a commitment to learning, sharing knowledge, and community-building for three interrelated audiences with different learning needs: our grantee partners, our team, our donors and the broader ecosystem.

During our 2024-2025 reporting year, we experimented with different ways of learning, ranging from external quantitative and qualitative participatory evaluations to piloting specialized learning grants for grantees in three of our focus countries. We identified three core learning goals for 2024-2025 that are rooted in our core values and theories of feminist evaluation, participatory evaluation, and emergent learning.

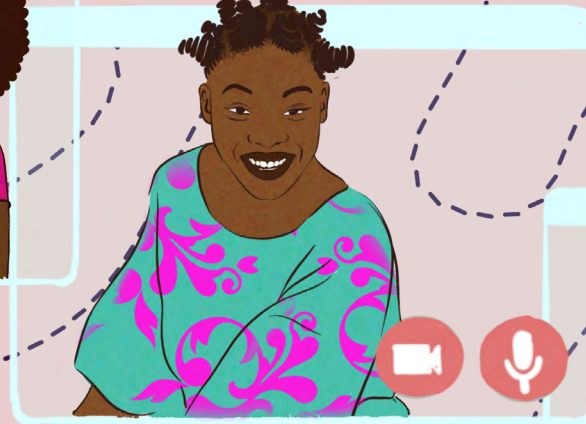
These goals include:

- **To document the journey of our grantee partners to better understand how they deliver locally relevant, girl-led and girl-centered gender transformative strategies.**
- **To better understand how we can best support grantee partners in their journeys.**
- **To contribute insights on how to support and resource CBOs to end child marriage and to advance philanthropic discourse and global efforts.**

Where Does Our Data and Knowledge Come From?

We use several ways to deepen our understanding of our grantee partners, their contexts, initiatives, challenges and backlash as well as the shifts and changes they are sparking and sustaining. These ways of learning prioritize centering the voices and experiences of girls and our grantee partners – who we recognize as the experts of advancing change in their contexts – as well as our program team. With the launch of our new 10-year strategy, we will be reevaluating our learning tools to ensure that we are further simplifying our processes and reducing the reporting burden for grantee partners as much as possible, in line with our commitment to a trust-based partnership.





Spotlight

Learning Grants Pilot in Three Focus Countries

Community-Based Organizations are leading community strategies that offer promising practices for the sector, but due to limited resources, they often face challenges with prioritizing and investing in their own learning agendas.

With support from the U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO) and the Gates Foundation, we have piloted different models of learning grants to support our grantee partners to articulate and answer key questions from their own perspectives and frames of reference. We launched these pilot grants with four partners each in three focus countries – Dominican Republic, Guinea, and Guatemala. These grants were also designed to support partners to build the skills and confidence needed to continue learning about their contexts and work, and in some cases, create space to directly involve girls or communities in these efforts. For example, during a learning visit at the halfway point of our pilot in the Dominican Republic, four of our grantee partners reported that they are advancing girls' leadership, community engagement, and institutional capacity through this learning support. With this additional support, they have collectively reached 589 girls with access to information, resources, opportunities, and services to improve girls' lives.

These three pilot projects will be completed in 2026, and we will draw lessons for our wider portfolio of grantee partners, and to inform future specialized learning efforts. In addition, we are expanding our mentoring and accompaniment to further integrate learning support to our grantee partners.

Voices From The Grassroots Series

In 2024, with support from the Gates Foundation, we launched Voices From The Grassroots, a new learning platform that creates an opportunity for direct learning and connection among all our grantee partners.

Curated as a series of online webinars, this initiative brings our partners together for conversation on a selected topic, and creates the space for identified speakers among them to share ideas, reflections, and experiences from their contexts. In the reporting year, we held three conversations focusing on the intersection between SRHR and child marriage; using digital technologies to advance work to end child marriage; and navigating the current local and global contexts, especially in relation to funding cuts and increasingly hostile environments.

The conversations are facilitated to highlight the professional, collective, and personal realities of the work that our partners lead in their communities, and to help to paint a picture of the kind of support they need to continue making a difference and sustain their progress. We are documenting the key strategies and messages from the speakers as well as the experiences shared by the broader community of partners who join these webinars.

HOW CBOS ARE WORKING TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

Every year, child marriage prevents millions of girls from living healthy lives and pursuing fulfilling futures, and CBOs are uniquely placed to seed, influence, and continuously drive change within their communities. At Girls First Fund, we've learned that there is not one way that CBOs can most effectively drive change; the magic of CBOs is best harnessed when they use strategies and entry points that they are best positioned to leverage to meaningfully shift norms and improve girls' lives.

Through our partners' reporting and the observations of our in-country program staff in our seven focus countries, we continue to measure the many ways in which our partners enter into work to end child marriage (strategies, or areas of focus), the different practical approaches they use to drive change (tactics), and the ways in which we can continue to support them in tackling underlying harmful norms, patriarchy, and gender inequality (through understanding where they sit on the gender integration spectrum).

7 Core Strategies Used

- Girls' leadership, Social and Behavior Change Communication, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), Advocacy, Education, Economic Empowerment, and Safe Abortion

25 different tactics used

- **Tactics used by more than 60% of partners:** community sensitization, girls' groups and

leadership training, SRHR information access for girls, engaging men and boys, engaging religious and traditional leaders, creating safe spaces

- **89% of partners** used gender-transformative or gender-responsive practices

Strategies and Focus Areas for Ending Child Marriage and Advancing Girls' Agency

Our grantee partners employ various strategies and entry points that inform their efforts to create change for girls and to end child marriage at the individual, family, community, and national levels. We document this information from grantee partners every few years in their application for new or renewed funding. Partners reported using seven core primary or secondary (additional) strategies. **Girls' leadership, Social and Behavior Change Communication, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), and Advocacy** were the most common strategies used across all partners, with 89% to 72% of grantee partners, respectively, reporting those as primary or additional areas of focus. Our partners also reported using **Education, Economic Empowerment, and Safe Abortion** as entry points on the pathway toward ending child marriage and advancing girls' agency.



Focus Area (Strategy)	Primary	Secondary	Total % of Grantee Partners
Girls' Leadership	43%	46%	89%
Social & Behavior Change Communication	22%	64%	86%
Advocacy	19%	53%	72%
Education	8%	47%	55%
Economic Empowerment	4%	50%	54%
Sexual & Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)	3%	71%	74%
Safe Abortion	1%	15%	16%

Practically, our grantee partners use more than 25 different tactics to drive change in their communities.

This year, 83% of partners reported that they **directly engage communities and lead community sensitization**. Nearly two out of every three reporting partners facilitated **girls' groups and leadership training (66%)**, **created SRHR information access for girls (65%)**, **engaged men and boys (65%)**, **engaged religious and traditional leaders (63%)**, and **created safe spaces for girls (61%)**.

Tactics Used By Grantee Partners



Gender-transformative approaches for ending child marriage

Our partners have made it clear: **ending child marriage and creating alternative futures for girls require going beyond interventions that simply delay the age of marriage.** Instead, we need to shift deeply rooted and harmful norms through a gender-transformative approach and support women- and girl-led organizations who know the issues the best.

Our mentoring and accompaniment support meets grantee partners where they are, measures their growth, and supports them on their journeys of moving across the continuum of gender integration in their programs. As we prioritize grantee partners who share our vision for change, we recognize that gender programming is a process and can continue to evolve, in either direction, without intentional investment and/or focus.

At a time when we are witnessing a rapid backsliding on gender equality worldwide, we celebrate the strengthening of gender-transformative approaches across our partners. **Nearly 90% of our grantee partners were identified as being gender-transformative or gender-responsive in their community work,** actively targeting root causes of gender inequality or analyzing the impact of gender in their programming.

We identified **that 64% of our grantee partners are using gender-transformative approaches,** acknowledging that our partners across regions confronted patriarchal, religious, and cultural norms restricting girls' autonomy and ultimately allowing

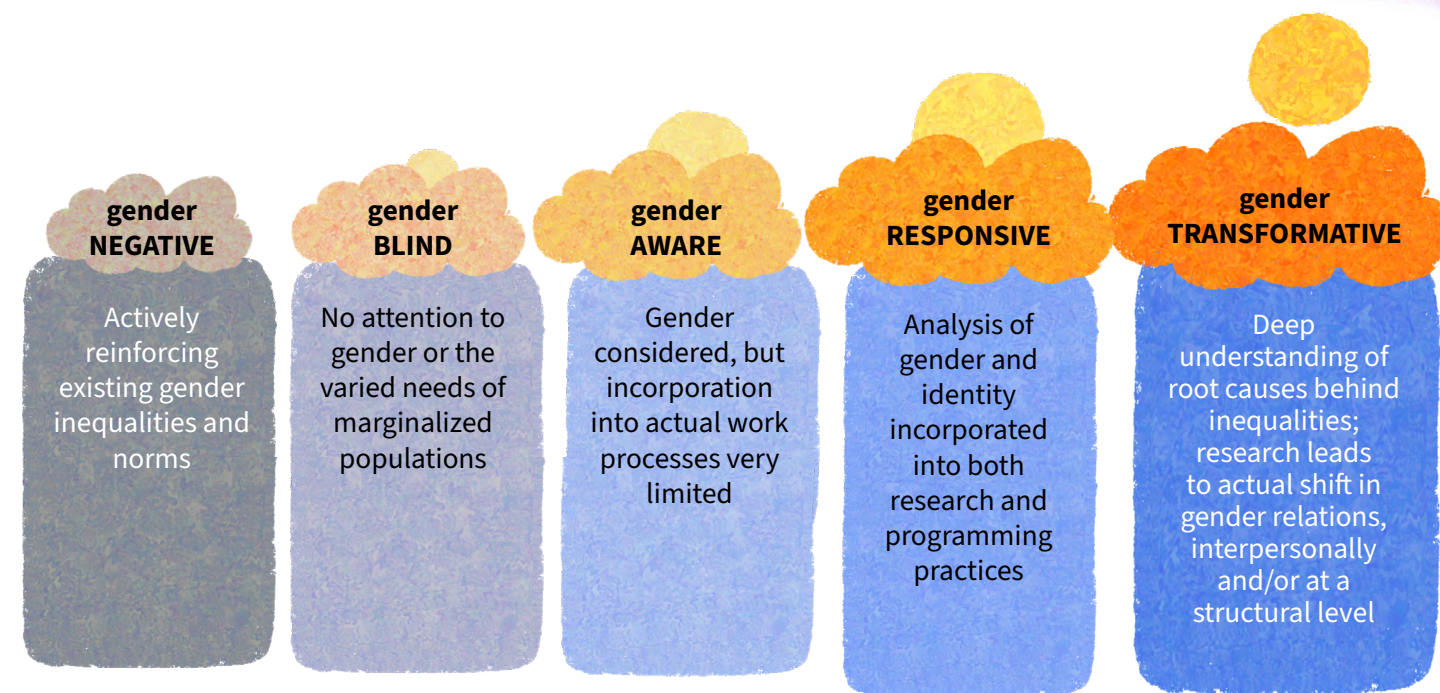


Figure: Girls First Fund's Continuum of Gender Integration

child marriage to continue. These partners used a range of strategies and tactics to advance their work. They created safe spaces for girls' leadership, fostered mentorship and peer networks, promoted school retention, and engaged men, boys, and elders to redefine gender relations from within.

They used intersectional approaches addressing overlapping inequalities, positioning diversity as a

source of strength. They demonstrated that local advocacy could produce tangible outcomes at community, municipal, and even national levels. They also helped to build and expand networks of girls and youth to set and then lead community-identified priorities on education, menstrual health and hygiene, and gender-based violence (GBV) prevention, turning individual empowerment and agency building into collective power.

What this looks like in practice

Strengthening girls' agency and equitable access to resources

Across contexts, partners are working to ensure that girls are present in decision-making spaces and are recognized as leaders who shape agendas and influence outcomes. Tactics such as leadership and mentorship training, peer-to-peer networks, and safe spaces for girls are central to this process. Many organizations also use community awareness and information-sharing to strengthen girls' agency and create supportive environments for their participation. Several partners have supported the creation of child and youth clubs in schools, empowering girls to become advocates for their own rights. Within these spaces, girls from marginalized backgrounds have gained visibility and confidence, leading awareness campaigns and speaking publicly against child marriage.



SHAKHI Friends of Women - Nepal

In Nepal, SHAKHI Friends of Women have appointed members of girls' clubs to their governing boards, creating tangible opportunities for girls to break gender stereotypes and take part in institutional decision-making within their organizations and communities.

"This milestone shows that girls are now directly involved in decision-making and influencing the direction of our organization, something that would have been unthinkable a few years ago." - SHAKHI program staff

Addressing Intersecting Inequalities & Mobilizing Collective Action for Gender Justice

Through intersectional and inclusive approaches, our partners are reaching girls and young women who experience multiple and overlapping barriers, ensuring that programs respond to the full complexity of their lives. Across focus countries, initiatives have also focused on survivors of child marriage, girls with disabilities, and orphans, creating safe and supportive spaces where diversity becomes a source of learning and empowerment. Experiences in conservative and religious settings show that this work requires patience and persistence.

Conexión Intercultural por el Bienestar y la Autonomía La Ceiba – Dominican Republic

In the Dominican Republic, Conexión Intercultural por el Bienestar y la Autonomía La Ceiba uses art, culture, and dialogue to reshape harmful narratives around gender, race, and ability; promote healthier relationships; and foster collective empowerment.

"By centering anti-racism, anti-ableism, and feminism, they equip girls to critically analyze and resist intersecting forms of oppression, while affirming their identities as Black girls with dignity and pride." - GFF Program Advisor

DRIVING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY-LED CHANGE

Amid challenging national and global ecosystems, our partners continue to work toward a vision of a child marriage-free world where girls can fully exercise their agency. Despite increased conservatism, gender equity backlash, climate crises, and substantial reductions in funding for their work, our partners continue to use a range of strategies and tactics to advance progress at individual, family, community, and national levels.

55% of grantee partners indicated that they prevented a total of 970 cases of child marriage*

We acknowledge the unique challenges partners have endured over the past year, making the **nearly 1000 cases of child marriage averted this past year** an incredible accomplishment to support girls worldwide. We also recognize that a reduction in the percentages and number of cases averted may be a sign of norm shifting, as over time, we would expect fewer child marriages or attempts because of our partners’ work.

Additionally, our partners are advancing this work across four key areas of change that we measure on the pathway toward ending child marriage and increasing girls’ agency. Most partners contribute to multiple changes through their programming, as they have found that changes in one area can strengthen or reinforce changes in the other areas.

Partners contributed to	%
Changes in awareness of child marriage as a violation of girls’ rights and gender inequities by girls, families, communities, and influencers	88%
Changes in norms, culture, and exclusionary practices/behavior	82%
Changes in girls’ access to quality resources, opportunities, and services	80%
Changes in laws and/or policies in favor of girls’ rights and gender equality more broadly	23%

Fatima Foundation - Nepal

At 16, Jaya* was pulled out of school and pushed into a forced marriage. Her girls’ group, FFN mobilizers, and community women intervened, offering support and a school scholarship. Ten days later, the marriage was cancelled, and Jaya returned to school. Now she is mentoring over 30 children.

“Now I fight so no girl loses her dreams like I almost did.” Jaya shares.

*Name changed to protect her identity

*This percentage is slightly lower than the number of cases documented in our 2023-2024 report, where 61% of partners reported directly averting 1,011 cases of child marriage. We recognize that 17% of our partners did not provide this data, which may suggest a slight underestimate of self-reported impact.



Changes in awareness of child marriage as a violation of girls' rights and gender inequities by girls, families, communities, and influencers

88% of partners have contributed to changes in awareness of child marriage as a violation of girls' rights and gender inequities by girls, families, communities, and influencers

One of the core areas of change our partners drive toward is increased awareness of the harms of child marriage and girls' value more broadly. **Most partners worked directly with women and girls through carefully designed activities that took into consideration their physical, emotional, and cultural realities.** Grantee partners recognize that conversations on child marriage or taboo issues may trigger resistance. As a result, they use strategic, non-threatening entry points to build trust before addressing sensitive topics.

Partners supporting economic empowerment (e.g., vocational skills in tailoring, hairdressing, soap-making, digital literacy, and craft production) and education/tutoring (e.g., exam preparation, computer and English coaching, literacy training, second-chance education programs) created regular gathering points where conversations naturally evolved. Sessions would often start by discussing dreams, career goals, friendships, and educational ambitions, and then highlighting the impact of child marriage on these goals.

Our partners also changed **awareness across family members, community leaders, boys and men, and other key stakeholders**, moving them from justification or passive acceptance of child marriage to collective action. Programs engaged parents through home visits, parent groups, and mother-father circles that linked child marriage to health risks, school dropout, economic insecurity, and violence. In parallel, religious and traditional leaders, teachers, local officials, and other community leaders joined intergenerational dialogue sessions, community theatre, radio programs, and classroom discussions that challenged long-standing justifications for child marriage; in some settings, religious leaders went further, publicly acknowledging their role in this harm and refusing to officiate marriages involving minors and publicly affirming that such unions are unacceptable. Boys' clubs and discussion groups created space for adolescent boys to question harmful masculinity norms, early unions, and transactional relationships.

As this awareness was internalized by community members, it began showing up in everyday settings – conversations at home, school lessons, community meetings, and religious sermons – laying a powerful foundation for driving norms change.

Accompagnement des Forces d'Actions Sociocommunautaires - Guinea

In Guinea, Accompagnement des Forces d'Actions Sociocommunautaires brought together girls, women, boys and men across 10 districts through intergenerational dialogues and positive masculinity sessions. Their community consultations first diagnosed harmful beliefs (e.g., “girls must marry after puberty,” “men alone decide,” “women can be beaten”), and then structured reflection sessions to help participants recognize how harmful norms had affected their own families. Participants were supported in developing collective solutions. As a result, men now share housework and support their daughters in school instead of arranging their early marriages; communities signed 10 anti-child marriage pacts; and 127 unmarried girls now receive protection and support through girls' networks and local councils.

“To be honest, I didn't support my daughters in school. I could enroll you in school, but as soon as you reached puberty, I'd leave you to fend for yourself. From now on, the youngest one here with me, I will do everything to support her until she finishes her studies.”

Breakthrough Trust - India

Breakthrough Trust's program in Jharkhand, India, effectively employed a gender-transformative approach, reaching over 16,000 people through school-based curriculum and dynamic community events. The initiative, using youth fairs, mobile film screenings, and theatre, successfully reframed child marriage as a rights violation for attendees across generations. This effort galvanized youth leadership, resulting in the activation of 20 Student Councils and youth teams who successfully advocated for change in response to their safety audits. Along with the collective involvement of parents and frontline workers, communities are now shifting priorities: families are focused on education and long-term goals for girls, reducing child marriages in their communities.

“I was very happy that my children asked me to support them in preparing a skit on discrimination and violence. It was very emotional for me because in our village, daughters are often married off at the young age of 14 and 15. I will not allow this to happen to my children.”

Changes in girls' access to quality resources, opportunities, and services

80% of partners have contributed to changes in girls' access to quality resources, opportunities, and services

Across contexts, our partners recognize that child marriage persists due to a lack of access to resources, opportunities, services, and information. They used community-centered work to respond, and this included **increasing formal schooling for girls** in settings where schools were available and functioning, noting higher enrolment, re-enrolment, and retention among groups of girls previously excluded or at high risk of dropout (e.g., pregnant girls, young mothers, married adolescents, girls with disabilities, and those from very poor or marginalized households). They provided academic support to increase school completion and exam success (e.g., remedial classes, exam coaching, school supplies), especially among West Africa and South Asia-based partners. They focused on removing structural barriers (e.g. safe access to toilets, menstrual hygiene support, re-enrollment) in East Africa and emphasized rights-based institutional changes to keep girls in school in Latin America.

Partners **increased girls' access to SRHR**, including information and services, reframing access from stigma to a right and entitlement. Across countries, comprehensive sex education (CSE) and SRHR were delivered through schools, clubs, safe spaces, churches, mosques, and community centers, giving girls practical knowledge on bodies, contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), menstruation, and child marriage as a rights violation. Regional differences suggest different cultural entry points,

ranging from rights-based CSE on consent, pleasure, and sexuality among partners in Latin America to risk, protection, and rights within existing cultural and religious frameworks among partners in South Asia and West Africa. In refugee contexts and among some East Africa settings, partners' SRHR focus was integrated with addressing trauma, GBV response, and mental health. Health facilities and youth corners became more "girl-friendly," with staff trained in confidentiality, non-judgmental care, and GBV response. Clearer referral pathways and counselling and peer-support mechanisms expanded, particularly for survivors of violence, girls with disabilities, and those in displacement or extreme poverty.

Our partners also increased access to **economic empowerment, social protection and justice, and decision-making spaces**. These ensured that delay of marriage and continuation of secondary schooling were more practically viable, providing more reliable pathways to support and redress for girls and allies seeking to prevent, interrupt, or annul early marriages. They also increased opportunities for girls to exercise voice, authority, and leadership, further laying groundwork for shifting community behaviors and norms.

Association Pour La Protection Et L'Accompagnement De La Jeune Fille - Niger

The Association Pour La Protection Et L'Accompagnement De La Jeune Fille in Niger prevented child marriage through comprehensive educational support. The Association supported re-enrolling girls who dropped out in school and improved learning conditions through providing school supplies, desks, and teaching materials that transformed girls' academic performance, resulting in a 100% pass rate at a target school's end-of-primary exams. The Association

simultaneously conducted awareness campaigns across 18 rural communes that directly challenged taboos about consent and girls' education rights, and are advocating with local authorities for policies to reduce school dropout rates. They also established protection committees and pioneered Niger's first foster family network in Dosso Region for girls fleeing violence and child marriage.

"In our societies, most parents believe that a woman's place is in the home and that it is unnecessary to send their daughters to school. And it is precisely this idea that we challenged, while encouraging parents to enroll their daughters in school."

Mesa A Favor de las Niñas y Adolescentes - Guatemala

In Guatemala, Mesa A Favor de las Niñas y Adolescentes increased girls' access to leadership opportunities by positioning girls as lead researchers investigating child marriage through Participatory Action Research across four departamentos. Girls collected data, analyzed findings, and presented to local and national authorities, breaking the silence around clandestine marriages and exposing how patriarchal systems perpetuate early unions. Their evidence compelled leaders in one city to acknowledge the need for dismantling oppressive structures, while leaders in another city recognized critical coordination gaps. As a result, girls' increased opportunity to lead elevated them from subjects of protection to recognized policy influencers, while shifting traditional power dynamics.

"Traditionally, girls have been excluded from spaces where decisions are made or where issues important to the community are defined. However, with this project, they not only participated in data collection but also led spaces for analysis and socialization of results before community actors and institutional representatives."

Changes in norms and exclusionary practices and behavior

82% of partners have contributed to changes in norms, culture, and exclusionary practices/behavior

Our partners understand that child marriage and the devaluation of girls persist often because of individual beliefs, expectations they believe other people hold, and behaviors that are practiced as a result, and are working across contexts to change these unwritten rules. Transformation among **religious and traditional leaders' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors** was highlighted as one of the most effective ways to change community perceptions, given their unique positions of power and influence in communities.

Our analysis of 2024-2025 partner reports reveals signs of progress in transforming community attitudes related to child marriage, with the most dramatic shifts occurring where sustained, multi-stakeholder engagement created active local champions. Examples in multiple country settings – for example, Nepal, Niger, and Uganda – illustrate that this approach had impact beyond a single geography or single religion. Additionally, **economic empowerment proved transformative for shifting gender norms**; girls who are earning income through partners' program training them on tailoring, digital skills, and entrepreneurship increased their decision-making power within their families, and parents began viewing educated and skilled daughters as investments whose potential could be maximized by delaying marriage.

One exciting area we'll continue to observe is the **cultural evolution of what can be discussed openly**

in our partners' communities. Our grantee partners reported that their work is enabling topics related to girls' rights and child marriage that were previously taboo, including marital rape, adolescent sexuality, disability, menstruation and menstrual health and hygiene, and boys' use of violence, to be addressed more routinely in their communities. Creative tactics such as theatre, storytelling, community dialogues, and radio have been used to facilitate these changes. Our partners have further described linkages between intersecting forms of oppression to racism and machismo in Latin American contexts to mixed gender forums on consent and menstrual health and hygiene in South Asian and West African contexts.

Our partners have **widened the range of acceptable attitudes and practices towards girls, gender roles, and marriage**, creating a new narrative that girls can be students, earners, leaders, and decision-makers, not just wives.



Muslim Teen Mothers Uprising Against Islam Forced Early Marriages, Marginalization and Extremism (MUTMUA) - Uganda

In Uganda, the Muslim Teen Mothers Uprising Against Islam Forced Early Marriages, Marginalization and Extremism (MUTMUA) achieved transformative change in communities by strategically engaging respected religious leaders to challenge deeply entrenched beliefs justifying child marriage.

Through mobilizing 43 young sheikhs and imams and 57 Nabakyaalas (community women leaders), MUTMUA successfully converted 62 influential Muslim leaders into active opponents of child marriage who now publicly apologize for past practices and work to prevent new cases.

This religious transformation enabled concrete educational and economic gains: 57 Muslim teen mothers returned to school, 29 at-risk girls escaped forced marriage and resumed education, and 34 at-risk girls received vocational training. The project built a powerful girls' movement of more than 500 members who reject child marriage and report cases to authorities; shifted attitudes and norms on girls' roles among men and boys; and even inspired active participation from high-ranking police officials in rescuing girls from forced marriages.

Changes in laws and/or policies in favor of girls' rights and gender equality more broadly

23% of partners have contributed to changes in laws and/or policies in favor of girls' rights and gender equality more broadly.

Although a small proportion of our grantee partners focus on advocacy or policy change as their primary strategy, nearly one in four partners have contributed to positive changes in laws or policies. Partners across geographic contexts leveraged community consensus to **facilitate positive changes to local bylaws and commitments**, such as increasing the minimum age of marriage within customary law or establishing local child protection committees to ensure enforcement, even formally including adolescents in these efforts.

Some partners advocated for **positive changes in education-related policies for girls** to enable pregnant girls to continue or re-enter schooling through retaking exams, providing childcare support, or practically enforcing national-level policies designed to support girls' education. Partners worked to establish **legal documentation reforms to ensure marginalized populations could access their rights**, including birth and civil registration as well as protections for individuals with disabilities. Twelve percent of our partners made **positive changes to a national or state-level policy**, and some partners successfully advocated for fiscal commitments to implement the policies.

Dalit Feminist Upliftment Organization- Nepal

In Nepal, the Dalit Feminist Upliftment Organization (DAFUO) converted grassroots mobilization into concrete policy commitments to end child marriage.

DAFUO started with building community evidence and support: six religious leader networks were trained and went on to stop four child marriages, demonstrating local buy-in; women, girls, and boys documented and intervened in child marriage cases, providing data on the problem's scope; and 35 women's businesses showed economic alternatives to early marriage were viable.

Using this proof, DAFUO conducted municipal workshops that secured government agreements to incorporate child marriage prevention into annual budgets, resulting in five wards being declared child marriage-free, with two municipalities committing to eliminate the practice by 2026 and 2027, respectively. Youth amplified advocacy nationally, with 29 network members writing to the Prime Minister to maintain the legal age of marriage at 20.

This transformation - from individual empowerment to structural change - demonstrates how community organizing can convert deeply rooted harmful practices into sustainable, government-backed movements for girls' rights, ensuring these gains persist beyond external funding cycles.

Comunidad de Lesbianas Inclusivas Dominicanas (COLESDOM) – Dominican Republic

In the Dominican Republic, COLESDOM works at the intersection of gender identity discrimination and child marriage prevention among Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, and Queer/Questioning (LBTIQ+) and gender-nonconforming adolescents. COLESDOM does this by ensuring youth who are in marginalized communities are aware of support services in order to decrease their vulnerability to early unions and family rejection.

The organization pursued systemic change through legal advocacy – securing birth certificate corrections for intersex youth, establishing name-change precedents through electoral courts, and advocating for civil registration reforms while building community acceptance through home visits, family accompaniment, and school anti-bullying partnerships. This dual strategy demonstrated how protecting gender-nonconforming youth from early unions required addressing both legal barriers and social exclusion, with program participants now leading local advocacy efforts.

REFLECTIONS ON OUR FUNDINGPLUS MODEL

Persistent challenges grantee partners are facing

One key area of learning for us this year was to **better understand the challenges our partners face so that we can adapt our support** accordingly. CBOs are uniquely placed to drive transformation in ending child marriage and advancing girls yet also face unique challenges to their work. Partners shared that they faced a range of complex and interrelated challenges that required adaptive, context-specific strategies. **Flexible, trust-based funding remains essential to sustain** these efforts. We present a summary of some persistent challenges across the socioecological model.

At the institutions, systems, and policy level

Weak law enforcement, bureaucratic inertia, and frequent turnover of political officials hindered sustained collaboration with local political institutions and authorities. In some contexts, **discriminatory legal frameworks** or security incidents required temporary suspension of partners' activities.

Partners responded through intensified advocacy with local governments, police, and schools; formalized cooperation through agreements and joint calendars; and engaged in coalitions to influence policy and

legislative reform. Awareness campaigns on girls' rights and laws reinforced policy accountability.

Country illustrations:

Nepal: A partner coordinated with district-level stakeholders and police officials to strengthen enforcement of child marriage laws and advocate for greater accountability among law enforcement agencies.

India: Collaboration with government programs enabled distribution of bicycles to girls to reduce distance-related dropouts.

At the family level

Economic and material constraints, particularly at the household level, remained a barrier to partners' programming. Poverty, a well-documented global driver of child marriage, led many families in communities reached by our partners to withdraw girls from school and/or arrange early marriages. Lack of access to basic infrastructure, for example, poor roads or absence of facilities, also remained a difficult barrier for partners to overcome.

Partners responded by providing family and community-level support to address financial hardships or resource access challenges that were affecting girls' opportunities. Some partners addressed family economic hardship through establishing community savings groups, supporting small businesses, or

providing educational scholarships to fund girls to stay in school. Other partners strengthened referral linkages to health facilities to improve access to SRHR services for girls. In combination with community conversations and parental engagement, these helped to support families further in making decisions to prioritize alternatives for girls.

Country illustrations:

Guinea: A partner addressed barriers to participation – lack of transportation access and poor road access in rural areas – by strengthening transportation support for both the field team and participants.

Uganda: A partner strengthened girls' access to SRHR services by training health workers on youth-friendly care and mapping referral pathways for girls to access contraception, HIV testing, counseling, and other support.



At the individual level

Poor mental health and psychosocial well-being emerged as a cross-cutting concern for both girls in communities served by partners and staff of the partner organizations. Exposure to violence and instability caused trauma, distress, and fatigue among both girls and staff.

Partners responded to their staff, building in organizational-level changes in some cases, as well as for the communities where these concerns arose. They integrated psychosocial support into their programs, such as hiring psychologists to provide individual mental health care or providing mindfulness and self-care sessions, as well as trauma-informed training for program facilitators. Some of this support was funded by the additional wellness stipends that we provide to our grantee partners. Community healing spaces and peer support groups encouraged collective strength, while wellness and mental health became core components of empowerment and education activities.

Country illustrations:

Guatemala: A partner provides community-based therapeutic support to help girls heal emotional wounds and strengthen their dignity, self-esteem, and sense of purpose.

Uganda: A partner found reconciliation meetings between young mothers and their parents often lacked follow-up and introduced quarterly psychosocial support sessions to rebuild relationships and keep girls in school.

Why our FundingPlus Model Matters Now

Every year, we ask our partners to share feedback on how our FundingPlus model, program team, and broader support have impacted their work. We invite partners to share what's working and where our model can be improved to better serve their needs as they reach communities.

Core, flexible, trust-based funding

Grantee partners repeatedly highlighted the strong, trust-based relationship they maintain with us as a funder. They described feeling heard and supported by our team members, noting that communication was open and responsive under any circumstance. Our flexible and comprehensive management approach was widely valued, allowing partners to adapt their work while maintaining accountability.

Mentorship, accompaniment, and program support

Our Program Advisors, based in our seven focus countries, were frequently recognized for their ongoing follow-up, mentorship and accompaniment support, and practical recommendations that helped partners to strengthen their programs. Partners also underlined the professionalism and empathy of the Program Advisors, particularly during one-on-one meetings, which fostered mutual learning and confidence.

Opportunities to strengthen collective power

Our grantee partners also described gratitude for convening and collective learning spaces that allowed them to reflect, connect, and learn, with feedback to expand these offerings. The focus country Annual Convenings, a multi-day shared space for all grantees within a focus country to come together, provide space for more knowledge sharing, peer learning, and coordination. Looking forward, we see opportunities to increase intentionality in collective spaces in our program work through portfolio reviews as well as in our learning work such as through Voices from the Grassroots, our partner peer learning space, and an updated learning framework to accompany our new organizational strategy.

The power of partnership for this moment

This approach to a trust-based, community-led, and long-term partnership model was seen as a distinctive feature of our work. It amplifies several of the key findings from our forthcoming external partner-grounded evaluation - "Pathways to Ending Child Marriage: Five Years of Impact Girls First Fund" - which validated that our FundingPlus model is meaningful, impactful, and appropriate based on the experiences of hundreds of grantee partners, staff, and national stakeholders across six countries.

SPOTLIGHT: WELLNESS AND CARE TO SUSTAIN THE WORK

In our continued practice of resourcing work in ways that reflect strong feminist values, we have intentionally provided grantee partners with wellness stipends in addition to our FundingPlus core, flexible support to advance partners' collective care and well-being. Although partners met with our country Program Advisors to understand the purpose of the wellness stipends, they had no strict mandates and engaged in a range of organizationally-driven interpretations of personal and collective wellness and the practice of care.

In many ways, their choices reflect what feminist scholars describe as different layers of care: individual well-being, collective care with others, and the structural conditions that make care possible. Their practices show how care is both personal and political, strengthening not only individual well-being but that of teams, organizational systems, and communities.

The wellness stipend was used across multiple and often interconnected dimensions that are best understood across different levels including:

Personal well-being

Partners provided support for activities and services that promote an individual's physical, emotional, or mental well-being. These included access to fitness classes or gym memberships, health insurance coverage, rest days or time off, access to mindfulness and self-care sessions, and, in a few cases, therapy or counseling sessions for individualized psychological support.

Collective care and team connection

Partners implemented team-building sessions that fostered communication, trust, and collaboration; team retreats and recreational outings in nature that offered space for relaxation and bonding; and celebration events that marked shared achievements, holidays, or special occasions. These practices often served as moments of emotional release and team cohesion, allowing staff to reconnect beyond the pressures of daily work.

Structural or organizational care

Partners made organizational-level provisions, including adding benefits or new policies that supported staff well-being and working conditions for all staff or across groups of staff (i.e., field staff, volunteers). These ranged from hosting meetings or strategic workshops to learning about self-care and how to include it in their

organizational policies, to providing transportation, meals, and improved office conditions. Some partners used the stipend to recognize all field staff or volunteers through incentives or bonuses for their dedication and effort. In some cases, funds also covered social insurance or welfare contributions, with this emerging as an area other partners hope to consider in future.

Direct financial and solidarity support

Some partners working in contexts with crisis or scarcity also described using part of or all the stipend to financially support individual staff members through helping them manage daily stress during a difficult period such as in response to health issues, bereavement, or other unexpected crises. These solidarity-based uses of the stipend illustrate how care is not only emotional but also material, rooted in equitable support within teams.



Use of Wellness Stipend

Level and theme of use	% of grantee partners
Personal well-being	28%
Collective care and team connection	57%
Structural or organizational care	14%
Direct financial and solidarity support	7%

Our partners have reflected that the wellness stipend has become more than a financial resource; it has served as a mirror for organizations to reflect on how they care for themselves. For some, it created the first – or only – opportunity to pause, reconnect, and acknowledge the importance of well-being as part of their collective mission.

“To be honest, we often get so caught up in our work that we forget to pause and take care of our own physical and mental health. This wellness program reminded us how important it is to slow down, refresh, and recharge - not just as individuals, but as a team. That renewed sense of connection and motivation has definitely been reflected in our work afterwards. We’re deeply grateful for the support. It wasn’t just an event; it was a reminder that our well-being matters too.” – GFF Grantee Partner

Our partners have shared that our way of funding and supporting their wellness is unique, strengthening trust and partnership.

“This space reminded us that taking care of ourselves is not a luxury, but a shared necessity, and that when we do so collectively, we are also taking care of the community, strengthening our networks, and recognizing that our well-being is part of the change we want to build.” – GFF Grantee Partner



ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH

We Defined a New 10-Year Organizational Strategy

We started this year with the recognition that the world is changing, and we must change with it to ensure that our support to our partners and the communities they serve continues to be meaningful. From the impact of COVID-19 to expanding conflicts and fragility to more hostile geopolitics and shrinking funding for gender and development assistance, the work toward ending child marriage and supporting adolescent girls' agency is in a precarious state.

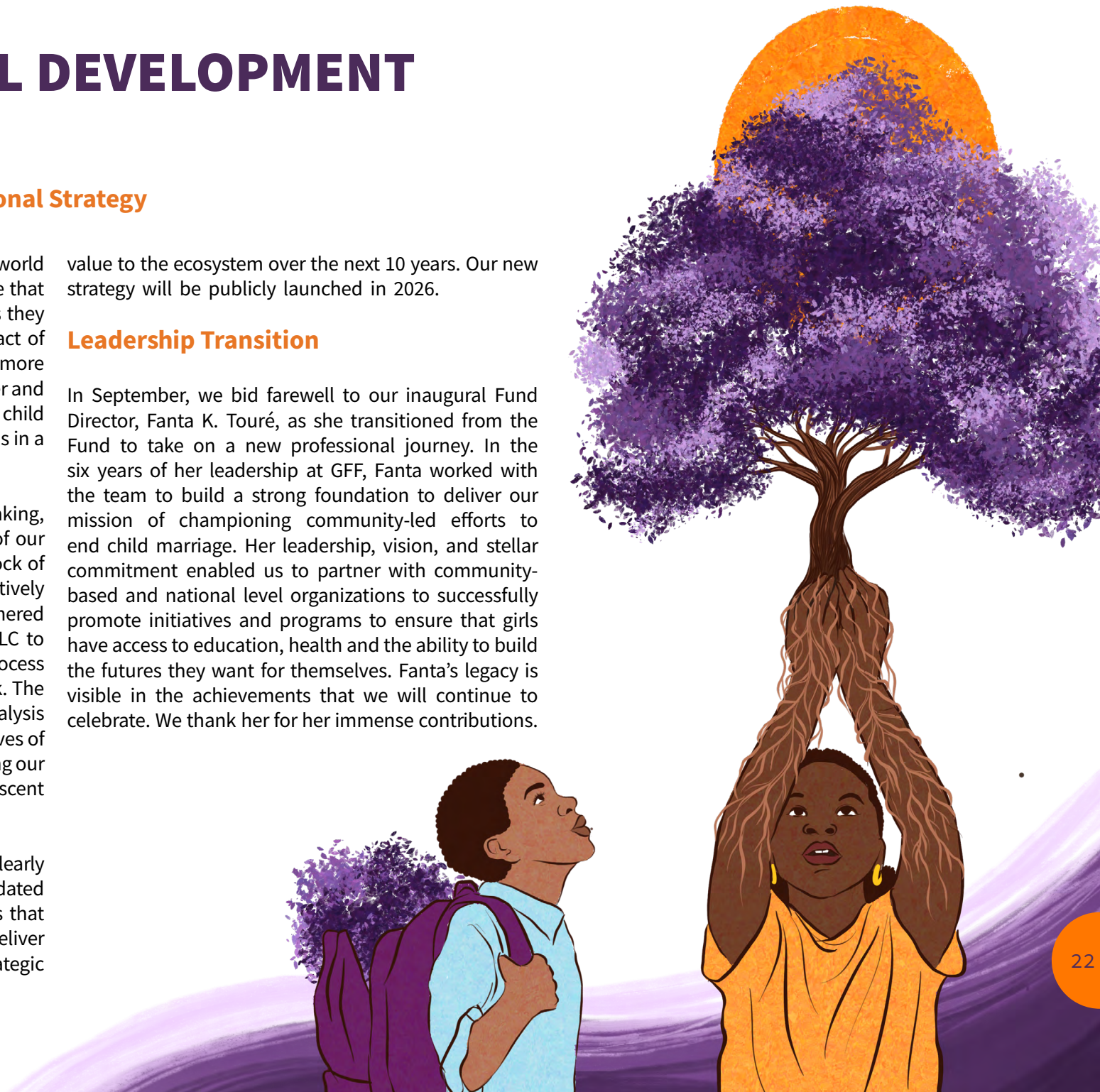
After more than six years of strategic grantmaking, we launched the process for a complete review of our organizational strategy, with the goal of taking stock of what we have accomplished and responding effectively to the global polycrisis. We commissioned and partnered with I.G. Advisors and later, SHE Thinks Group LLC to help us facilitate a participatory strategic review process and to articulate an updated approach to our work. The process included a robust data-gathering and analysis component, centering the feedback and perspectives of more than 200 members of our community including our team, our Advisory Board, grantee partners, adolescent girls, and peer organizations.

At the end of this process, we were able to clearly define a refreshed strategy that details our updated theory of change, defines the key strategic pillars that will drive our work, and refines our approach to deliver both sustainable support to our partners and strategic

value to the ecosystem over the next 10 years. Our new strategy will be publicly launched in 2026.

Leadership Transition

In September, we bid farewell to our inaugural Fund Director, Fanta K. Touré, as she transitioned from the Fund to take on a new professional journey. In the six years of her leadership at GFF, Fanta worked with the team to build a strong foundation to deliver our mission of championing community-led efforts to end child marriage. Her leadership, vision, and stellar commitment enabled us to partner with community-based and national level organizations to successfully promote initiatives and programs to ensure that girls have access to education, health and the ability to build the futures they want for themselves. Fanta's legacy is visible in the achievements that we will continue to celebrate. We thank her for her immense contributions.



We Launched the Second Cohort of Our Changemakers Partners

In October 2025, we onboarded the second cohort of our Changemakers grantee partners, comprising 15 organizations from 10 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America & the Caribbean.

Changemakers is our global girl-led grants program that provides resources to scale up successful gender-transformative approaches to end child marriage and early unions outside our seven focus countries. It is co-designed with our Changemakers' Girls Council, a group of adolescent girls and young women who support us to define our grants criteria, identify priority countries, select grantee partners from our pool of nominated organizations, and support our continued learning engagements with these partners. This year, the Council comprised 17 girls aged between 16 and 25 years-old, drawn from 10 countries, and engaging across 7 languages including Dominican Sign Language.

Leaning on the feedback from the first year's Council, the girls and young women had the opportunity to interview nominated organizations this year, in addition to the review of their application documents. Our new cohort of Changemakers grantees will receive grants of up to \$65,000 USD to support their work across various focus areas, including some emerging areas within our broader portfolio.

We Explored External Strategic Partnerships to Shift Global Discourse

This year, we supported the United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) and the Feminist Network for Gender-Transformative Education (FEMNET4GTE) in exploring evidence on alternative research approaches

beyond randomized control trials and how education drives changes in girls' agency and ending child marriage. Our support led to the launch of three new briefs, and two of our team members (our Guatemala Program Advisor and Interim Director of Learning) facilitated a hybrid in-person and virtual session of practitioners, policymakers, and feminists during the FEMNET4GTE Conference during the 80th session of the U.N. General Assembly Week (UNGA80).

We also finalized three new learning products: Population Council's Endline Evaluation Report of GFF's grantee partner programs in three contexts; Population Council Consulting's Costing Study of a GFF partners' community-based programming in India; and our Five-Year evaluation, which leverages deep learning from more than 100 grantee partners. All three of these learning products have reinforced our belief in our FundingPlus model, provided important evidence on what is currently working with some of our grantee partners, and deepened our understanding of how CBOs drive change in their communities. We have begun socializing these findings with a small group of internal and external colleagues and look forward to sharing our learnings externally in the coming year.



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