

EMpower's Path to Meaningful Youth Engagement



Why is meaningfully engaging young people so important to us at EMPower?



EMpower believes that young people are valued experts with deep insights into the challenges they face and the needs and opportunities they have, all based on their lived experiences. This is why young people have a fundamental place in EMPower's vision and strategy, and more broadly in the ecosystem of youth-focused philanthropy.

As a grantmaker committed to creating better futures for young people, we recognise that only by listening to them and amplifying their wisdom can we create real transformation. That's why we are committed to organisational practices that shift power and demonstrate trust and respect for young people. We know that when youth are actively participating in philanthropy, we see more strategic outcomes and sustained impact at the individual as well as at the institutional and societal levels.



EMpower's journey to engaging young people



2006



Years before the United Nations declared 11 October the International Day of the Girl Child, EMpower and five other grantmaking organisations formed the Grassroots Girls Initiative, with support from Nike Foundation. Over eight years, the initiative evolved from finding and funding grassroots solutions that promoted the rights of girls, to working as a “community of practice” that forged links between grassroots organisations and built on members’ varied knowledge and approaches. This, along with important learnings from our grantee partners who were working with girls, cemented EMpower’s commitment to prioritising girls’ access to opportunities, skills, and platforms.



“We should hear the voices of the youth through representatives and be more involved in the decision-making. Nonetheless, it is also important to cultivate the youth’s skills and capacity so that they can actively participate in decision-making.”



–Young person from the Philippines





2008

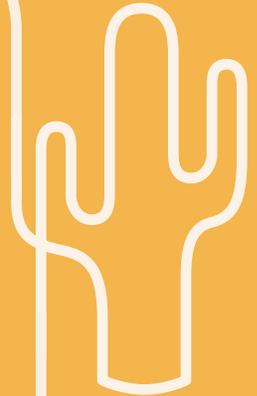
EMpower emphasised its focus on youth protagonism and agency. This went on to become a foundational value in our way of working with young people. We began leaning heavily on the lived experience of youth and recognising this as crucial expertise to shape the work.

We addressed a felt need of grantee partners to improve how they supported young women to become micro-entrepreneurs, culling best practices, conducting two regional workshops, and producing a handbook called “Its Her Business.”



2009

In India, EMpower saw a need, and an opportunity, to foster unique programmes tailored specifically to adolescent girls. We thus set out on a journey to build a portfolio of work around girls and girl-centred pedagogies and affirmed our institutional focus on gender. This led to important work conducted at a global scale on taking a gender and empowerment approach in sports programmes and nontraditional livelihoods.



2010

With the growth of girls-participation models, EMpower launched small “Spark and Ignite” grants for current grantee partners so they could pilot new approaches and accelerate and share innovation in girl-centred programming.



2012

EMpower sought to create a space that nurtured and empowered girls as leaders, which gave rise to the first Adolescent Girls Learning Community, located in Mumbai, India. (Another Learning Community was launched in Barranquilla, Colombia, which functioned for a few years before it disbanded.) The Learning Community focused on addressing the issues these diverse girl leaders prioritised and supporting their efforts to effect change. This also created a space to develop and try different tools and approaches for and by girls as they continued on their leadership journeys.

“The importance of inclusivity and allowing input to be received from those involved is crucial to any engagement. Youth want to know that their voices are being heard, that they’re not being prescribed information or decisions that they do not agree with.”

–Young person from South Africa

2014

As a founding strategic partner of the With And For Girls (WAFG) Initiative, EMpower—along with other funders—aimed to strengthen organisations that centred girls in their programming. WAFG engaged girls as key decision-makers in deciding which organisations received the awards, which consisted of unrestricted funding, space for collaboration, and enhanced visibility. Towards that end, EMpower facilitated two panels of girl leaders (ages 13-18), one in Mumbai and one in Delhi, India. Panel participants reviewed proposals and interviewed and selected organisations who were meaningfully engaging girls in governance, programme design, and decision-making.



2016

EMpower invited young people from East and Southeast Asia to participate in national focus group discussions to better understand their access to and perceptions of reproductive health. Learnings from the consultations informed a Learning Exchange on adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights—with a special focus on gender and power—with partners from the region.



2017

A second Adolescent Girls Learning Community was established, in Delhi. The initiative supported adolescent girls in becoming changemakers in their communities. Years later, these Learning Communities are shown to be powerful in amplifying the messages of girls and improving their lives.



2018

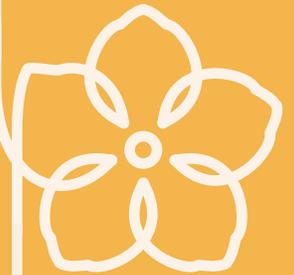
EMpower set out to learn more about best practices in working with very young adolescent girls, knowing that puberty is an important marker in a girl's life, not only biologically and developmentally, but culturally. This time in a girl's life shapes her opportunities, challenges, and risks and significantly impacts her future. We commissioned a study to pull from published literature and programme experts and sought the perspectives of very young adolescent girls themselves. This was published as “A Window of Opportunity: Programming With and For Very Young Adolescent Girls” and included a series of approaches and methodologies to centre programming around very young girls and their life cycle. This seed later informed the first Learning Exchange in Latin America on Programming for Very Young Adolescent Girls, in which grantee partners and young girls between the ages of 11-17 participated. Girls provided key insights into the realities, interests, and needs of their peers in the region. Following this insightful convening, EMpower created a virtual Community of Practice to support our partners' continued learning on working with this population.





“When we broaden out the table of participation, young people not only bring up relevant content and perspectives to their age group, but also the suggestions they make bring fresh air to very natural problems of CSOs [community service organisations]...It takes a lot of courage to listen to things that we sometimes think are not right, but you have to be prepared to trust in lived experience as knowledge.”

–Grantee partner from Latin America



At the same time that year, EMpower launched the Girls Advisory Council to advise our grantmaking strategy in India and guide us on best meeting the needs of adolescent girls. We recognised that girls can be—and should be seen as—the experts on their own lives. They are capable of directing and leading change. With the launch of the Girls Advisory Council, EMpower’s longstanding commitment to empowering marginalised adolescent girls in India took a leap forward.





2019

For the first time, EMpower facilitated a panel of girls in India for the Girls First Fund that made decisions about grants focused on ending child marriage, with grantmaking directed to community-based and locally-focused organisations.

That same year, several Learning Exchanges with young people participating and leading took place across EMpower's regions. In Ghana, we hosted a Learning Exchange on nontraditional livelihoods and gender equity.

At the organisational level and as part of our 2020-2025 strategic planning, 70 youth from 12 countries participated in a consultation. They helped shape EMpower's priorities and strategies for supporting local organisations and young people through resourcing, capacity strengthening, and cross-sector collaboration.



2020

With the outburst of COVID-19, EMpower set out to develop a girl-led and centred participatory research study to understand the impact of the pandemic on the lives of adolescent girls. Our participatory action research initiative in India "COVID In Her Voice" was led by the girls themselves from start to finish. It amplified their voices and needs and empowered them through the process itself. The girls not only identified problems but came up with solutions. And we shared their recommendations to funders and other key stakeholders and factored them into our own funding decisions. The methodology furthered EMpower's commitment to expanding the role young people, and specifically girls, should play in determining grantmaking and programming approaches.



2021



Ready to take our learnings to the next level, EMpower partnered with Restless Development, an organisation that supports the collective power of young people. We sought to strengthen our internal organisational readiness to meaningfully include young people in decisions around our programmes and grantmaking. EMpower embarked on this journey hand in hand with a Youth Task Team, made up of 5 young people engaged with our grantee partners' work from South Africa, the Philippines, Brazil, Turkey, and Peru. Jointly, Restless Development and the Task Team conducted over 33 interviews, analysed 56 survey responses, and reviewed 10 documents to provide a set of recommendations for how EMpower can further engage young people over the next 3 years.

This same year, EMpower engaged girls (ages 10-14) and young women (ages 15-24) in South Africa, along with our grantee partners in the country, in a consultative process to document mental health interventions, identify common challenges, and strengthen the impact of mental health and wellbeing initiatives on adolescent girls.



2022

EMpower worked with young women in South Africa to facilitate a three-day learning journey on addressing adolescent mental health in the country, building on the consultations conducted the year before.



“In feminist analysis, we say decisions should be made jointly with people with lived experience. Today, EMpower’s Board is very reflective of emerging market thinking, but we are not in the lives of young people and we cannot know what is it like to be a young person in their community. EMpower stands to gain a lot [from piloting an approach to participatory grantmaking].”



–EMpower Board member



Where are we headed? 2025 vision for meaningful youth engagement



EMpower's goal, by 2025, is to build on our existing expertise and learning and to systematically harness youth experiences and voices. We seek to ensure young people can shape and make decisions in their lives, families, and communities. EMpower will nourish these approaches through listening, learning, growing, and adapting. We celebrate the value young people bring to our understanding—influencing our decisions, programmes, and funding.



“It is important for EMpower to embrace all parts of EMpower in this meaningful youth engagement journey: from the failures to the successes, and all aspects of who we are as a funder.”

–EMpower staff member



By the end of fiscal year 2025, EMpower will have an active youth advisory structure where young people from our grantee partner network will be selected as follows to:

- Serve as advisors in EMpower's grantmaking and programmatic decision-making.
- Amplify young voices to shape regional and country-specific programme strategies.
- Advance their individual youth leadership and professional development, setting them up to become next-generation leaders.

Since 2006, EMpower has been on a journey to increase youth protagonism in the development and philanthropy sectors and in our ways of working as an organisation. We are committed to intensifying our efforts to meaningfully engage young people, share our learnings, and, together, make lasting positive impact for generations to come.

