EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Including gender-transformative design into development programming is the new gold standard across most international development sectors. While implementers and funders of youth programming want to include the gender-transformative approach in their program design, they usually are not gender specific. With this brief, we hope to highlight some ways in which future positive youth development (PYD) programs can address the impacts of gender inequalities and restrictive gender norms on young people. The YouthPower Learning Grants provide us with an opportunity to look back at a diverse sample of initiatives and extract insightful lessons about where gender and PYD intersect and how they can be applied in future programming.

Using the four domains of PYD along with an analysis of some of the primary characteristics of gender-transformative approaches, this brief offers six lessons for future PYD programming and the corresponding recommendations that can be found below:

Lessons to Ensure PYD Programs include Gender-Transformative Design
1. Program staff and gatekeepers harbor gender norms and biases that affect boys’ and girls’ participation in activities.
2. Both boys and girls internalize gender norms in ways that can hinder their own development and opportunities for the future.
3. Gender-based violence is a prevalent and pervasive factor in the lives of young people.
4. Gender equality gaps in leadership continues in NGOs and initiatives, especially at the local level.
5. Gender norms and inequalities affect the accuracy of PYD data collection for monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems.
6. The belief that gender and sexuality is binary is still prevalent in the world and in program design.
Recommendations for Gender-Transformative PYD Programming

Overall, it is clear that the PYD community needs to further explore how gender inequalities and restrictive gender norms affect each of the four pillars of PYD and how programs can respond and transform those realities to ones of equality and liberation. In addition, the lessons that emerged from the Learning Grants point to the following specific recommendations for PYD programming:

1. Understand and address gender norms and biases held by program implementers and gatekeepers.
2. Create spaces for youth to unlearn internalized, restrictive gender norms, while also addressing gender norms in the broader community.
3. Gender-based violence should be more prominent within the PYD framework and PYD program approaches.
4. Fund young women-led, community-based organizations who are leading their own initiatives for gender equality.
5. Make it a priority to conduct research and collect data on gender in PYD programs, using a range of qualitative and quantitative methods to increase accuracy.

INTRODUCTION

Positive youth development (PYD) is a programmatic framework for supporting healthy, productive, and engaged youth as they grow into adulthood, empowering them to reach their full potential (see text box to the right). Yet the pathways to adulthood are different for every young person and are influenced by multiple complex factors. One of these factors is the system of deeply entrenched gender norms and inequalities that are pervasive in nearly all communities around the world (Heise et al. 2019). Gender norms are the unwritten rules in society that create and perpetuate a hierarchy of power that favors men and boys, especially those who conform to expectations of how men and boys are supposed to act (Heise et al. 2019). This favoritism contributes to systemic gender inequalities that are widespread across nearly all global indicators of health, well-being, power, and wealth (UNICEF 2020). As a result, children and young people experience the transition to adulthood in significantly different ways depending on their sex assigned at birth, gender identity, or gender expression.

In light of this growing understanding about the impact of gender norms and inequalities on young people, policymakers and practitioners sought to design PYD approaches that are gender-transformative. Gender-transformative approaches “actively strive to examine, question, and change rigid gender norms and imbalances of power” as a means of achieving gender equality at every level of society (Lorist 2018). Gender-transformative approaches seek to empower the people who have been most harmed by restrictive gender norms and inequality—particularly women, girls, and young people who do not conform to gender norms—while also engaging gender conforming men and boys in the advancement of gender equality (CEFM and Sexuality Programs Working Group 2019; Lorist 2018; Marcus and Harper 2014).

PURPOSE

Through its series of learning grants, the USAID-funded YouthPower Learning (YPL) project supported several initiatives that offer insights about how to apply a gender-transformative approach to PYD. This brief explores the lessons that emerged from those grants about the intersection of PYD and gender-transformative approaches.

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1 See USAID, “Promoting Positive Youth Development.”
2 YouthPower Learning, managed by Making Cents International, hosted four grant cycles and awarded 17 successful grants to youth-led and youth-serving organizations to implement PYD initiatives, research studies, or multimedia documentation. Two of the grant cycles focused explicitly on addressing gender norms or gender inequality in some way, and some of the grants from the other two cycles also integrated gender. For descriptions about the grant cycles and a full list of the 17 grantees, see https://www.youthpower.org/yp-grants-under-contract.
Lesson 1: Program staff and gatekeepers harbor gender norms and biases that affect boys’ and girls’ participation in activities.

Understanding and shifting harmful gender norms is a central part of gender-transformative approaches. Gender norms refer to the “shared expectations or informal rules about how people should behave, according to their gender” (CEFM and Sexuality Programs Working Group 2019). Gender norms begin to influence a person’s life trajectory even before birth. Studies show that parents change their behavior toward their children according to their gender as soon as it is assigned. Teachers, family members, peers, the media, government policies, and institutions continue to reinforce these norms. For example, as young people explore possible work and career
opportunities, adults are more likely to guide young girls and women toward professions that are paid and valued less, such as secretaries or social workers, whereas young men are guided toward higher paying careers in technology, finance, and business (Heise et al. 2019).

Examples from YPL Grants

Several YouthPower Learning Grants demonstrate the importance of addressing harmful gender norms in young people’s environments, particularly the norms held and perpetuated by program implementers and gatekeepers, such as parents, family members, and teachers who refer youth to the program. In addition, a few grantees also sought to challenge harmful norms in the broader community.

The Waves for Change (W4C) program utilized their Learning Grant to conduct participatory gender training and research to better understand how gender norms and inequalities affects youth participation in its surfing therapy program. They held gender trainings for 23 coaches (11 young women, 12 young men) and program managers (three women, five men). W4C learned how stereotypes about girls, norms of masculinity, and the acceptability of violence against women and girls reflected gender biases that affected the way coaches interacted with both girls and boys in the program. They also learned that the people who refer students to the program (e.g., parents and teachers) referenced gender stereotypes as reasons why they did not refer young women to the program. Reasons included a disproportionate expectation for girls to do housework, biased concerns about girls’ ability to swim, and beliefs that because boys are at higher risk of drug use and violence, they needed the W4C program more than girls did. These learnings are discussed in greater detail in the case study that follows.

Visionaria Network in Peru and Safeplan Uganda also trained their staff and volunteers on gender norms and biases.

Recommendation 1: PYD programs should understand and address gender norms and biases held by program implementers and gatekeepers.

Program implementers of PYD programs must be aware of how gender norms influence them and the way they treat youth in the program. As W4C has shown us, gender norms can negatively affect how young people participate in and benefit from PYD programs. In addition, it is important for program to be aware of how gender norms harbored by parents, teachers, and other gatekeepers are preventing youth from accessing and meaningfully participating in the program. Even if the program cannot change those norms, there needs to be a plan in place to mitigate the impact on youth’s access and ability to participate.

CASE STUDY: WAVES FOR CHANGE, SOUTH AFRICA

Waves for Change (W4C) is a surf therapy program for youth in South Africa who have been affected by violence and abuse. W4C reaches more than 1,000 youth per year across six townships in South Africa. Because the majority of their participants are boys and young men, they began an initiative to recruit more girls and young women to the program by offering girls’ only days, providing additional transport, and hiring extra female staff. These steps led to an increase in participation from 16 to 35 percent, but W4C wanted to dig deeper into how gender norms were influencing girls’ and boys’ recruitment and participation. W4C used the Learning Grant to conduct a participatory, mixed methods research study about the impact of gender stereotypes and norms on recruitment and participation in the program. They also trained the W4C coaches, who were also youth, to be aware of gender norms and unconscious biases. This case study highlights what they learned about gender-transformative PYD.

How gender norms in the enabling environment influence youth recruitment and participation in the program

The Learning Grant found that gender norms influence how coaches respond to and treat students in the program, how teachers identify which children need the program, and how open parents are in allowing their children to participate.

The Grant revealed how gender bias influences expectations of what girls can achieve in surfing. Many coaches and staff assumed that girls were not interested in participating in the program for
stereotypical reasons, such as concerns about menstruation or getting their hair wet, and interest in different sports like netball. So, they treated girls differently, allowing them to sit on the beach and not surf, or to use boogie boards instead of surf boards. However, the focus groups with girls proved these reasons to be incorrect assumptions. The training and research helped coaches become more aware of these biases and devise ways to change their practices.

“Prior to the training, [one male coach] said he used to push girls to learn to surf by asking them one time if they wanted him to teach them. If they said no, he would move on and never ask them again. He stated that he now realizes they may be embarrassed and that he responds with more patience.” — Waves for Change

Teachers are one of the main groups that refer young people to the program. In W4C’s study, informants reported that teachers’ gendered views of surfing as a male sport meant they were less likely to refer girls to the program. Parents are also gatekeepers and they too harbored gender stereotypes that prevented young women from joining the program. Some examples shared during focus groups were the disproportionate expectation for girls to do housework, biased concerns about girls’ ability to swim, and beliefs that because boys were at higher risk of drug use and violence, they needed the W4C program more than girls did.

“Parents were described as holding female children to different standards as they get older, which makes recruiting older girls more difficult. These standards included an expectation for girls to contribute more to household chores, which was supported by stories told by children in the focus group discussions. According to these children, differing parental norms also appeared as greater parental concern for a girl’s ability to swim and the view that boys are at higher risk of drug use and violence, therefore more in need of the W4C program.”— Waves for Change

How internalized gender norms negatively affect girls’ and boys’ mental health and risks of violence

The participatory, mixed methods research study of W4C participants revealed that restrictive gender norms influence the mental health status of children and feelings of anger, resentment, and worth. The girls had lower self-esteem and the boys had trouble expressing their emotions, and anger over pressures to fit masculine stereotypes.

These traditional norms about masculinity that discourage men and boys from expressing emotion also affected the male coaches. Their research found that male coaches were uncomfortable expressing emotion, and, as a result, usually depended on the female coaches to deliver the psychosocial portions of the W4C curriculum. The “limited comfort [that] male coaches had with leading the emotional aspects of the program… therefore limited ability to model emotional vulnerability to the boys” (Waves for Change 2019). The Learning Grant helped staff and coaches become aware of this discomfort and its connection to gender inequality, allowing them to begin the process of addressing it by integrating gender awareness into all coach trainings. This integration involved ensuring that both male and female coaches spent equal amounts of time on the mental health and surf training parts of the program.

W4C highlighted the ways in which restrictive gender norms also put boys and young men at risk of violence in different ways than girls. Young girls in the W4C program commonly reported a fear of rape and being more likely to be physically and verbally punished by their family members. Most concerns about boys and violence were related to organized violence in the forms of gangs or violent extremist groups. The research from W4C revealed how the common gender stereotype that boys should be seen as strong was linked to their tendency to engage in violence, which is supported by the literature on masculinity and violence.

“The stories told by children in the focus group discussions displayed both anger and fear connected to the roles that boys and girls are meant to fulfill, including anger around a need to be strong and to be in gangs for boys.” — Waves for Change

Although boys who experience violence are more likely to perpetuate violence as adults, and men are more likely to be the perpetrators of violence than women, girls and women have also internalized the acceptability of violence. Through their participatory research, W4C learned that some of its coaches—both male and female—believed that it was okay to use violence against women and girls.

Prior to the training, both male and female coaches held perceptions about acceptable use of violence against women and girls. For example, one female coach said, “Sometimes a woman pushes and pushes

3 Heilman and Barker, “Masculine Norms and Violence: Making the Connection.”
a man, and she is so annoying that he has to hit her just once to shut her up.” The extent to which the short set of gender trainings was sufficient to change these perceptions is not clear. Nor is it likely, given the pervasiveness of gender-based violence. However, because of the Learning Grant, W4C learned this is a common perception that needs to be addressed through gender awareness workshops for all coaches as part of their regular training.

Finally, W4C’s research pointed to ways in which gender norms and assumptions about violence that are harmful to boys and men can still reinforce hierarchies in access to resources and assets. As previously mentioned, parents and teachers assume that the boys should be the priority focus of the program because they are more likely to engage in violence, even though girls are more likely to experience violence and suffer from their own mental health challenges because of gendered patterns of socialization. Further, assumptions about gender and violence may affect their engagement in the program once they are already enrolled. Coaches reported greater “fear” among female participants whereas female participants reported feeling neglected, which suggests a misinterpretation on both sides.

**Lessons about measuring the influence of gender norms**

Similar to the research conducted by the Education Development Center, W4C also learned that data collection methods do not always accurately collect information about gender norms and biases. When W4C used the following mental health indicators in its quantitative survey, the data results did not indicate any difference between males and females.

- Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 10.
  - I feel good about who I am (mental health outcome indicator), 4.4.
  - When I get angry or upset, I talk to someone about it (mental health outcome), 5.5.
  - I fight a lot with people [like kick or punch them] (mental health outcome), 6.6.
  - Feeling of safety [I feel safe at home/school/beach] (mental health outcome), 7.7.
  - Sense of belonging [I feel like I belong at home with my family/with my friends/in my surf group] (mental health outcome).

However, their focus group discussions did identify gender differences in mental health status, revealing a lower sense of self-esteem among girls and difficulty expressing emotions among boys. Specifically, “the stories told by children in the focus group discussions displayed both anger and fear connected to the roles that boys and girls are meant to fulfill. This included anger around a need to be strong and to be in gangs for boys and a sense of rejection and feeling unloved among girls due to unequal treatment by their parents.” This raises questions about the extent to which certain quantitative measures of mental health can accurately measure gender gaps.

**UNLEARNING INTERNALIZED GENDER NORMS**

**Lesson 2: Gender norms are internalized by youth in ways that can hinder their own development and opportunities for the future.**

Gender norms are not just imposed from the outside from parents and coaches; all people, including the youth that PYD programs are aiming to help, have internalized gender norms, unconsciously accepting them as normal (Boudet et al. 2012). This acceptance is true for women, girls, and gender non-conforming youth, just as it is for men and boys. For example, young women and girls tend to internalize notions of their inadequacy, limited potential, and low sense of self-worth whereas young men and boys internalize the pressures to be strong, powerful, and dominant (David 2014). Agency, the ability of youth to employ their assets and aspirations to make or influence their own decisions about their lives and set their own goals, is one of the main domains of PYD. As such, gender norms “are in constant dialogue with … agency” and influence or may even determine a person’s choices and capacity to act (Boudet et al. 2012).
Examples from YPL Grants

Several Learning Grants sought to understand and challenge internalized gender norms and how they impact young people’s development and opportunities for the future. Many used participatory and reflective workshops or training courses to help young people see themselves and their environment in a new way. Some grantee organizations used workshops that explicitly challenge gender norms, such as the gender awareness trainings conducted by Komo Youth-led Club and Waves for Change. Others, like The Biz Nation, used a psychological approach to help young women change the behaviors that have come about from being socially conditioned by gender norms.

Mentors, peer coaches, and guest lecturers are other ways grantees sought to challenge internalized gender norms by exposing young women to a wider range of life and work possibilities than they could imagine. Dream Factory Foundation ensured that many of their guest lecturers, who presented throughout the course, were black women, allowing their students to see themselves in the successful person speaking to them. In a society that marginalizes and discriminates black women, they needed to meet firsthand successful black women leaders and entrepreneurs.

The GRL Power Program in Jordan found that giving young women an opportunity to design and lead research about an issue that affects them can also lead to internal transformation. The activation of confidence and self-awareness is especially important for girls whose confidence is systematically hampered by gendered societal norms that devalue girls and women. “This experience boosted my self-confidence, and I was able to know how younger girls [and girls my age] think… and how I can talk to them and discuss,” said Amina from the Amman research group.

The unlearning of internalized gender norms is not always a smooth process. Both the Komo Youth-led Club in Uganda and W4C in South Africa learned that it can be contentious.

Komo Learning Centres established the youth-led club in 2016 to help young people address the pressing needs in their communities. The videos funded by the Learning Grant document the first year of the club—from recruitment and leadership elections to designing and implementing club activities.4 One video highlighted lessons learned from the gender training they conducted for all members that was ultimately helpful, but initially contentious. As one participant said, “Personally, when they talked about gender, what would come in mind was that they are advocating for women’s domination over men.” Another woman said the training was initially very “aggressive,” but, in the end, the session was “very good because it opened our minds.” Similarly, after going through the Waves for Change surf therapy program in South Africa, all participants struggled to envision how gender roles and norms could change. “The children had a hard time thinking about how gender roles and norms could shift. In some discussions, they were able to envision change (e.g. girls playing soccer), but in most [discussions] both the boys and girls continued to face challenges in breaking out of norms and as a result felt angry and resentful.” —Waves for Change

Recommendation 2: Create spaces for youth to unlearn internalized, restrictive gender norms, while also addressing gender norms in the broader community.

Programs must create spaces for adolescents and young people to unlearn internalized, restrictive gender norms and gain a new consciousness about themselves and their potential. Gaining a powerful consciousness about one’s self and one’s potential is foundational for activating agency, one of the four pillars of PYD. In addition, PYD programs that integrate efforts to reflect and challenge traditional, restrictive gender norms need to be prepared for heated and emotional reactions by participants. Have plans in place to facilitate young people through their emotions. Skilled trainers, emotional safe spaces, and time for reflection are important parts of this process. Finally, aligned with Recommendation 1, it is not enough for young people to unlearn internalized gender norms; if program implementers, gatekeepers, and others in the enabling environment still harbor those norms, then young people are still limited in their ability to assert their agency.

**GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

**Lesson 3: Gender-based violence is a prevalent and pervasive factor in the lives of young people.**

One of the reasons restrictive gender norms remain intact is because “failure to conform…can trigger strong social sanctions, such as ridiculing men for being emotional or scorning women who dress inappropriately” (Boudet et al. 2012). All too frequently, people who challenge the norms and expectations placed on them by their gender are targeted for increased harassment and violence from their peers and others in their communities (UN General Assembly 2018). Gender-based violence serves to regulate and police young people’s understanding of what they can or cannot do, based on their gender. Domestic violence and sexual assault are two of the most prevalent forms of gender-based violence and have destabilizing effects on individuals, families, and communities. In particular, the threat of physical and sexual violence is used to control girls and women’s mobility and access to opportunities (Plan International 2019).

**Examples from YPL Grants**

The Learning Grants show how the prevalence of gender-based violence, or the threat thereof, has a powerful influence on the lives of young people. The main finding across all three research cohorts from Mercy Corps’ GRL Power research in Jordan was that adolescent girls only feel safe in public spaces if they are accompanied by someone. Similarly, in their research about why and how young people in conflict or post-conflict settings engage in civic activities, the United Network of Young Peacebuilders found that the threat of violence is a greater barrier for girls who want to engage in civic activities than it is for boys (UNYP 2019). W4C’s findings offer insights about how boys experience violence differently than girls, as discussed further in the case study.

The Learning Grants also demonstrated how gender-based violence makes the workplace a less safe space. For example, Asante Africa Foundation used their learning grant to assess their girl-led entrepreneurship program, which revealed that 16 percent of the young women from the program in Tanzania reported that they were sexually harassed during job placement interviews (Asante Africa Foundation 2019). Knowing that sexual harassment will be a likely experience for young women, Dream Factory Foundation included an intensive, two-day sexual harassment training as part of its job readiness program (Dream Factory Foundation 2019).

For the girls in Jordan, the threat of gender-based violence is a barrier in itself. Their research pointed to how the threat of violence in their enabling environment—from their home to their place of work to any public space—curtails girls’ opportunities to assert their agency. As one adolescent girl said, “I don’t feel free in anything, even in my choice of clothing, or even in my thoughts. I feel like my thoughts are being watched by my mother and brother” (Mercy Corps 2018a).

**Recommendation 3: Gender-based violence should be more prominent within the PYD framework and PYD program approaches.**

Violence—or the threat of it—against women and girls in the home, public spaces, and at work was a persistent theme across many of the Learning Grants. Although many of them acknowledged the pervasiveness of gender-based violence, the PYD framework does not provide much emphasis on the need to dismantle this persistent barrier. Given the vulnerability and fear of gender-based violence and exploitation that emerged across many of these grants, the grant recipients’ safety practices should be more visibly shared and discussed as part of their reporting processes.

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5 The report also said that they also feel comfortable “being in a public space where other people are present,” which presumably means people they know, since public spaces, by definition, almost always contain other people.
Lesson 4: Gender equality gaps in leadership continue to exist, suggesting the need for better dissemination of gender transformative practices.

One of the goals of the YouthPower Learning Grants was to learn from young people themselves about their solutions to the development challenges that affect them. Because of systemic gender inequality, young women are often overlooked by those in positions of power because of their gender in addition to their young age. Young women also frequently lack access to educational opportunities, free time, social networks, and economic freedom that young men have, and therefore are not considered for high-profile political or development roles. Thus, being proactive about opportunities to address gender equality gaps in young women’s leadership is especially important.

In addition, research suggests that funding gender equality initiatives designed and managed by young women-led organizations at the grassroots is in and of itself a gender-transformative approach because it is shifting the agency and assets involved in youth development work to young women. Specifically:

- Social norm change is most effective and likely to succeed if it is led by groups who are from the communities they serve (Htun and Weldon 2012; Cislaghi and Heise 2018). Initiatives that seek to transform gender norms that devalue and discriminate against young women and girls will be most powerful, and most sustainable, if they are led by the young women and girls from those communities.

- When other young women and girls see women in leadership positions in their communities, it can expand their aspirations of what they can achieve simply by seeing a role model who is a successful woman (Beaman et al. 2012).

- Finally, because community-based gender equality and women’s rights organizations are vastly underfunded, financing these organizations is filling a large gap in the funding environment. In fact, only one percent of international development funding for gender equality actually reaches community-based, gender equality organizations like the ones funded through the Learning Grants (Staszewka, Dolker, and Miller 2019).

Examples from YPL Grants

The most notable examples of YouthPower funding young women-led initiatives was the Young Women Transform Prize, which gave grants to six young-women-led and -founded community-based organizations. The grants allowed these organizations to continue, expand, and learn from their activities promoting economic empowerment for young women. For example, the Disabled Women’s Empowerment Centre (DWEC) in Nepal was founded and run by Anjana K.C., a woman in her early 30s who relies on a wheelchair because of a physical disability. DWEC received a grant to renovate a women’s training center by adding a ramp, footpath, and bathroom that is accessible to people with physical disabilities including hearing and visual impairments.

Another example is Safeplan Uganda, which was also a Prize recipient. Founded by Annet Birungi when she was 24-years-old, Safeplan works to create income opportunities for illiterate and landless men and women in rural Uganda. Safeplan used their grant to expand their women’s beekeeping enterprise. Speaking of the benefits of gender equality initiatives being led by community-based organizations, Annet says, “we are in the community’s shoes. We know what they need and what they want.”

Although not a Prize recipient or young women-led organization, the GRL Power program in Jordan was nonetheless an example of funding a girl-led initiative, because the girls designed and led their own research project about an issue that affected them: public safety (see text box). As implementers discussed in their grant reports, the prospect of girl-led research is in and of itself transformative because it flips the traditional top-down power dynamic of
research. Their report explains, “Girl-led research aims to amplify [girls’] voices and challenge the existing power dynamics by providing the girls with the platform to speak for themselves rather than having someone to speak on their behalf... [the process of being able] to create knowledge and represent her own reality, and own it, boosts her confidence and awareness of herself and of her experiences” (Mercy Corps, 2018a).

**Recommendation 4: Fund young women-led, community-based organizations**

Organizations and donors should not only give young women opportunities to meaningfully contribute to PYD, but should also create spaces for them to lead and drive development themselves. The Young Women Transform Prize is a strong example of funding spaces where young women can lead change on issues that affect them most. Organizations and donors should expand funding to organizations and initiatives that are designed and led by young-women-led, community-based organizations like those funded by the Young Women Transform Prize. Organizations should also collect and report data about proportion of funding that goes to youth and young-women led organizations.

**CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRAMMING**

**Lesson 5: Gender norms and inequalities affect the accuracy of PYD data collection for monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems.**

Few youth programs that are not exclusively focused on young women collect any gender differentiated data or include research to analyze results or outcomes differentiated by gender. This lack of collection in and of itself continues to be a major gap in youth programs. Moreover, the YouthPower Learning Grants have also shown examples of how gender norms can be difficult to measure. Quantitative data collection methods do not always capture the nuance of how gender influences people’s perceptions and expectations.

Both the Education Development Center (EDC) and W4C documented discrepancies between quantitative and qualitative data about gender norms. In EDC’s research about which soft skills are most important for youth education and employment, their quantitative data suggested that male and female youth and employers perceived certain soft skills as being equally important for women as men (Pagel et al. 2017). However, the qualitative data revealed gender biases. Both men and women in all three countries expressed that some soft skills are more important for women than they are for men, revealing gender biases about expectations for how women and girls are expected to behave. There were also nuances within the countries. In both Honduras and Rwanda, they reported that women need more skills in emotional stability, agreeableness, and communication. Filipino youth expressed that all of the five primary soft skills were more important for women than men. Young men in Rwanda reported that leadership was more important for men than for women.

The W4C program had a similar experience with regards to mental health indicators. The program’s quantitative survey also did not indicate any significant difference between males and females with regards to their mental health. However, its focus group discussions revealed that girls have lower self-esteem, and boys have more difficulty expressing their emotions.

The GRL Power Project shared another insight about data collection methods for gender-transformative PYD. The project’s report suggested that when adolescent girls answer questions posed by their peers on the topic of public safety and harassment, they may be more likely to give thorough responses. This anecdotal insight is worth exploring further. It is aligned with a rich literature on participatory research with adolescents and young people conducted by international development and research organizations.6

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6 YouthPower Learning explored this topic previously in a webinar on Engaging Youth in Research, available online at: https://www.youthpower.org/resources/recording-and-resources-youthpower-learning-webinar-engaging-youth-research.
Recommendation 5: Make it a priority to conduct research and collect data on gender in PYD programs, using a range of qualitative and quantitative methods to increase accuracy.

Recognize the limits of quantitative data in capturing gender gaps and biases. Because gender norms and biases are often subconscious, it is not surprising if they are not easily revealed through simple quantitative surveys about perceptions on nuanced topics such as mental health. Mixed methods research that uses quantitative and qualitative data is important for overcoming potential inaccuracies or biases in surveys.

Lesson 6: A non-binary understanding of gender and sexuality is not commonly applied in practice.

In theory, gender-transformative approaches are based on a non-binary understanding of gender and sexuality; however, this is still not commonly applied in practice. A gender transformative approach implies a nuanced understanding of gender that goes beyond the two binary categories of being either male or female (Lorist 2018; CEFM and Sexuality Programs Working Group 2019). Gender transformative approaches should be inclusive of gender non-conforming people and others with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and/or sex characteristics. Yet, there was no indication from any of the Learning Grants that they were addressing how gender affects young people who identify or express themselves in gender non-conforming ways. This fact is particularly notable in the discussions of gender-based violence because gender non-conforming and other LGBTQIA youth experience high rates of violence and harassment because they are not conforming to restrictive gender norms (Advocates for Youth 2019).

All discussions of gender in the grantee reports appeared to assume a gender binary of two distinct categories of gender: girl and boy or man and woman. And even though many issues came up related to marginalization on account of a social identity or circumstances other than gender or age (specifically physical, mental, visual, and hearing disabilities as well as migration status, conflict-affected, and cultural minority) none of the grant reports indicated marginalizing circumstances because of someone’s sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. This lack of indication does not mean that either the initiatives funded by the Grant or the organization itself fail to include a gender non-binary lens in their work or work with LGBTQIA communities. However, it is worth noting that these elements were not visible in their programming or reporting.

Recommendation 6: Explore gender-transformative approaches that apply non-binary understandings of gender and sexuality.

Children and young people whose gender identities, expressions, and sexualities do not fit within normative expectations will likely face a backlash in their communities. Gender-transformative approaches to PYD must address the restrictions that gender norms create and work diligently to expand the culturally determined range of gender expressions for all young people, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sexual characteristics. Gender-transformative PYD must strive to include all young people, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, to improve outcomes for all.

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7 LGBTQIA = Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual
CONCLUSION

As more PYD programs look toward applying holistic approaches that take into consideration the entirety of the complex, intersecting dynamics that influence a young person’s pathway to adulthood, there is a lot they can learn from gender-transformative practices. Going forward, the youth development community needs to put greater emphasis on gender within the PYD framework and PYD programs. The community must expand its understanding of how gender-transformative approaches can bolster the impact of PYD programs and ensure equitable impact on boys, girls, as well as gender non-conforming youth. Implementers need greater clarity about how the PYD framework can be applied in a gender-transformative way to address the repercussions of gender inequalities and restrictive gender norms on each of the four PYD pillars.

Ultimately, gender-transformative practices are trying to change the status quo of gender inequality by addressing its root causes within society while creating space for the people who have been most marginalized by gender inequality to drive this change. The projects cited in this brief are a small snapshot of ongoing efforts, but nonetheless shine light on some of the steps practitioners are taking to expand the normative expectations we place on young people simply because of the sex they are assigned at birth. By creating spaces for young people to challenge restrictive societal rules about gender, they can shape their own futures to fulfill their full potential.
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Research


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