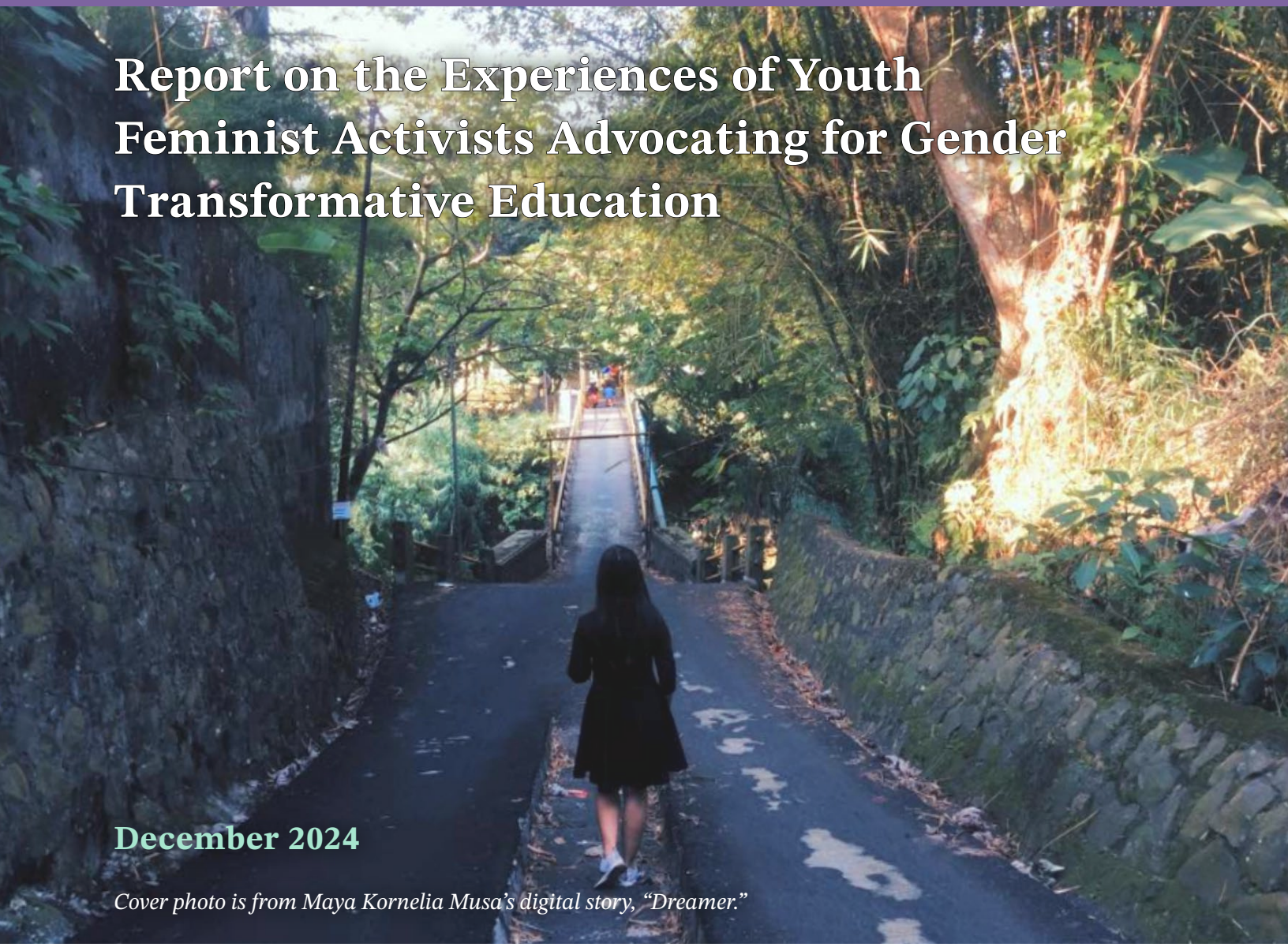
LEADING CHANGE:

Report on the Experiences of Youth Feminist Activists Advocating for Gender Transformative Education



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Cover photo is from Maya Kornelia Musa's digital story, "Dreamer."

TRANSFORM EDUCATION
hosted by UNGEI

University of Windsor

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gender transformative education is a vision for education that is free of all forms of discrimination and violence while actively contributing to changing harmful social gender norms and creating more equitable societies. It is a concept that has been strongly advanced by youth feminist activists, including those within the Transform Education network, an international coalition of feminist youth-led organizations and activists housed within the United Nations Girls Education Initiative. This report describes findings from a research project entitled "Leading Change: Youth-Led Feminist Activism for Gender Transformative Education." The research studied the experiences of activists ages 18–25 advocating for gender transformative education, involving 12 Transform Education members from 11 countries across Asia and Africa as participants in research using focus groups and digital storytelling.

Findings demonstrate an urgent need for gender transformative education across a wide range of country and cultural contexts, illustrating the ongoing prevalence of gender-based violence and discrimination particularly affecting girls and LGBTQ+ children. Participants understand gender transformative education as inherently intersectional and intersectoral, illustrating that gender equity in education cannot be disconnected from other forms of equity, and that education stakeholders must collaborate with other public systems and community stakeholders to support all children to thrive in schools.

Participants are advancing gender transformative education in innovative and influential ways that demonstrate the ingenuity and impressive capacity of youth activists. They are, however, also frustrated by the continuation of practices of involving youth that are performative and tokenistic. An alternative model of youth participation is operationalized by the Transform Education network which, according to participants, is genuinely youth-led and embodying feminist principles in practise.

Key recommendations for education stakeholders are to:

- Promote the adoption of gender transformative approaches to education that prioritizes the eradication of gender inequity and other connected forms of inequity in schools and positions education as an agent of social change;
- Support youth-led organizations by providing funding opportunities that involve mentorship and capacity building;
- Amplify the voices of young people; when doing so, involve a diverse group of youth representatives and create sustained opportunities for influence with clear outcomes from their engagement.

The case for gender transformative education and youth participation is most strongly outlined by the research participants themselves in the digital stories they created as part of this project. They can be viewed at: **https://ed4genderjustice.ca/leading-change**.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender transformative education mobilizes all parts of the education system (e.g., policy, pedagogy, funding, monitoring, community engagement) to shift gender stereotypes, attitudes, norms and practices by challenging power relations, rethinking gender norms, and raising critical consciousness about the root causes of inequality.[1] It expands previous understandings of gender in relation to education by stipulating that education should counteract gender-related barriers that children face in accessing education and prevent all forms of gender-based violence and discrimination that they may face within school. This should be done by wholistically considering gender within all levels of the education system, including through gender-responsive budgeting, teacher training, and monitoring and evaluation.

It further involves equipping students with the social awareness and critical thinking skills to enhance gender justice within their broader communities, including by considering the linkages between gender and other categories of social harm and discrimination including based on race, sexual orientation, ability, socio-economic status and, increasingly, the effects of climate change. Gender transformative education recognizes that girls and LGBTQ+ children are disproportionately affected by discrimination, violence, and exclusion related to gender but that all children are impacted by gender norms and expectations and benefit from gender transformative education.

The development of the concept of gender transformative education is revolutionary in part because its articulation has deeply involved girls and young people. One of the key partners in formulating and advocating for gender transformative education has been Transform Education, a feminist coalition that brings together feminist youth-led networks, organisations, and individuals from around the world with the mission of ensuring "that every child, adolescent and young adult is able to receive a quality gender transformative education regardless of their physical and mental abilities, race, gender and sexual identities, religion and ethnicities."[2]

Transform Education is housed within the **United Nations Girls Education Initiative** (UNGEI) and situates itself as a youth-led coalition operating with intergenerational collaboration and support. Its members are connected by a shared commitment to gender transformative education and six priorities, which are school-related gender-based violence, comprehensive sexuality education, girls' education in emergencies, period poverty, the STEM gap and gender digital divide, and changing gender norms. The youth members are, however, vastly diverse in terms of their identities, locations, and how they connect to these six priorities.

1 Plan International, Transform Education, UNGEI, and UNICEF. *Gender Transformative Education: Reimagining Education for a More Just and Inclusive World.* **https://www.ungei.org/publication/gender-transformative-education**.

2 "What We Do," Transform Education, accessed April 30, 2024, **https://www.ungei.org/what-we-do/transform-education**.

OBJECTIVES

Given Transform Education's unique positioning, structure, and orientation (described further in the findings section of this report), this research project sought to study the experiences of its youth members advocating for gender transformative education, with the over-arching research question: **how can youth feminist activists enhance their impact on gender transformative education?** Sub-questions were:

- How have youth activists contributed to the advancement of gender transformative education?
- How have youth activists experienced feminist leadership in the gender transformative education movement?
- How have youth activist voices been supported and received by education stakeholders?
- What barriers do youth activists face in having their perspectives heard by education stakeholders?

This report describes the research findings; it is written for education stakeholders who are interested in better understanding the concept of gender transformative education and/or who want to more meaningfully engage with youth activists. It also speaks to youth who want to magnify the impact of their contributions through feminist activism.

METHODOLOGY

The Leading Change project is led by Dr. Catherine Vanner and supported by research assistants Meenal Singh and Valerie Alexander at the University of Windsor. It was designed and coordinated in partnership with Transform Education, specifically with input from network Co-Coordinators Ashlee Burnett and Jona Turalde, with strategic guidance from Yona Nestel and Milena D'Atri from Plan International and funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Input from Antara Ganguli and Natasha Harris-Harb at UNGEI has helped inform its framing and strategic implications.

Given the project's emphasis on enhancing youth voice, it was important to design a methodology that enabled youth participants to tell their own stories and have control over what they wanted to articulate through the research project. To do so, a digital storytelling method was adopted. Building most directly on Leva Rouhani's description of digital storytelling with mothers' associations in Benin,[3] the method was adapted for a virtual and transnational space. Digital stories are 3–5 minute multi-media videos that tell a story using a combination of music, images, and narration. Dr. Vanner took a training course on digital storytelling via StoryCenter[4] to prepare for this research.

Following an announcement of the project at the FemNet4GTE event in Istanbul in November 2023,[5] a recruitment call was sent by the Transform Education Co-Coordinator to the approximately 60 Transform Education member organizations who had been invited to the FemNet4GTE, regardless of whether they attended. Members between ages 18–25 were invited to participate. 12 participants (see Table 1) from 11 countries across Africa and Asia were divided into three groups. Data collection took place between November 2023–February 2024. Participants were compensated for their time according to the rate used by Transform Education.

Participants were sorted into three groups of 3–5 participants. In each group, data collection began with an opening focus group in which participants shared their activism stories with each other. Afterward, Dr. Vanner met and worked individually with participants to create a digital story. With varying degrees of support, each participant wrote their digital story script, recorded themselves reading it, and selected accompanying images to tell their story. They had the opportunity to remain anonymous or to include their name, image, and voice in the story. All participants opted to record the story using their own voice and all but one chose to have their full name and identity included in the story. Once completed, participants could download the story and share it as they wished. Closing focus groups involved screening the stories and reflecting on their implications. A draft report was shared with participants to validate and/or recommend changes to the initial analysis and give them the opportunity to remove anything that they were uncomfortable being included; 5 participants provided feedback on the draft report.

3 Leva Rouhani, "Using digital storytelling as a source of empowerment for rural women in Benin," *Gender & Development 27* no. 3 (2019), 573-586. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2019.1664140

4 "StoryCenter: Listen Deeply, Tell Stories," StoryCenter, accessed April 30, 2024. https://www.storycenter.org

5 "Feminist Network for Gender Transformative Education 2023 Report," UNGEI, accessed April 30, 2024. https://www.ungei.org/publication/feminist-network-gender-transformative-education-2023-report

Table 1. Participants in the Leading Change Project.
Participants' digital stories can each be viewed at https://ed4genderjustice.ca/leading-change/.

Participant Name	Quoted As	Country of Origin
Esther Ezem	Esther	Nigeria
Maya Kornelia Musa	Maya	Indonesia
Maryada Neupane	Maryada	Nepal
Joan Kembabazi	Joan	Uganda
Yande Banda	Yande	Zambia
Farrah Munawar	Farrah	Pakistan
Baraka Damien	Damien	Malawi
Chea Engmey	Mey	Cambodia
Njeri Maria	Maria	Kenya
Isabel	Isabel	Taiwan
Ngô Ngoc Nga	Nga	Vietnam
Bao-Ngoc Nguyen	Ngoc	Vietnam

FINDINGS

The research team was deeply humbled by the narratives shared by these truly remarkable participants. Their stories recount the indomitable spirit of feminist youth activists and demonstrate that their capacities and value as educational stakeholders know no limits. Results show the ingenuity of youth activists, the unique and invaluable perspectives and skills that they bring to education advocacy, policy making, and service delivery, particularly in relation to gender transformative education. They also show the ways in which, despite increasing recognition of the value of youth voices, their participation is still often relegated to performative practises by the education stakeholders they engage with. The participants in this study articulate an alternative vision for youth-led participation, one which is being operationalized by the Transform Education network.

The following summarizes the findings from the focus group conversations and the digital stories, but the most powerful narratives are the digital stories themselves, now published online at (**https://ed4genderjustice.ca/leading-change/**).

Findings are divided into several parts. This first focuses on the participants' articulation of gender transformative education, including the ongoing need for it and the specific ways in which it is envisioned by the participants. The second describes the capacities and contributions of youth activists in relation to gender transformative education. The third explains the ways youth activists continue to struggle with intergenerational collaboration as they are frequently under-valued and their participation is often restricted to a performative degree. The final section describes the participants' demands for meaningful youth engagement and points to Transform Education as a successful model for youth feminist leadership and intergenerational collaboration.

The Urgent Need for Gender Transformative Education

Participants described their experiences growing up in 11 different countries across Asia and Africa. They had vastly different backgrounds and identities, with diverse racial and religious identities, sexual orientations, gender identities, abilities, and socio-economic status. Yet a universal characteristic was that they were became activists due to some level of personal experience with gender-based violence and discrimination. As Maya observed, a commonality across the digital stories is:

> **"how the society put us through the portion that actually hinders us… we might have different issues in different areas or even different countries, but every issue is that we were talking about, it's about gender inequality, how it actually brings us to this position."**

Some participants, after experiencing severe violence and loss, described a tortuous period of depression before "taking control" of their lives and pursuing activism as a means of preventing and supporting other girls. As Esther described, **"My activism began within myself, knowing I needed to empower myself to provide safety for girls like me—girls who have been abused and forced to leave school due to stigma and stereotypes."** They all recognized that their education system did not effectively address the discrimination they experienced and, in many instances, was actually a site of violence.

The types of violence and discrimination they experienced at school were wide-ranging. Sexual violence in schools was described by Farrah, who

explained that her school administration was aware of the violence and did little to respond or prevent further violence from occurring. She said,

> **"it was around the time in my school that there was a case of sexual harassment. That was, you know, that took place in school, and the school did not really… They just hushed it up. There was no, you know, accountability."**

Esther recounts that girls also experienced sexual violence at her school. She also explained that instances of sexual violence happening outside of school would spill over into the school environment, particularly when victims faced incessant bullying related to their experiences, thereby turning school into a highly traumatic environment for survivors of sexual violence. In her digital story, she notes the incongruency between the promise of school as a safe and empowering place, contrasted with her lived experience there: **"Education, they had said, would empower and protect me, but in pursuit of this, I witnessed the cruellest forms of insecurities."** These experiences reflect a devastating global trend in which it is estimated that 246 million children and adolescents experience school violence and bullying in some form every year, often relating to sexual violence.[6]

Several participants described confronting gender stereotypes and constraints for the first time when they entered school, demonstrating the highly active role schools play in perpetuating harmful gender norms. Mey's digital story opens with a cheerful picture of her as a young child with a short haircut and a wide smile, then changes to a school setting as she describes starting school and being introduced to repressive gender norms:

> **"On that first day, when I stepped into the classroom, a teacher asked me whether I was a girl or a boy and whether I should sit with the girls or the boys because I did not wear a skirt. There was a loud laugh from the whole class; later on, my classmates kept harassing and bullying me."**

While Mey describes being bullied because of her gender identity and expression, Maria was bullied due to her identity as a girl living with cerebral palsy, forcing her to start **"fighting for myself"** and leading to an ongoing struggle against an education system that was bewildered by her. She explains:

> **"fighting in my primary school was much harder because children started pointing out my ability and my identity. Asking why I am like that. And for me, I just knew I was like that. The teachers did not know what to teach me or how to help me learn. They did not have the skills and the resources to even imagine my potential."**

Participants' narratives underscore the intersectional nature of the gendered violence and discrimination occurring at school.

Participants are frustrated by ongoing discourses that focus solely on girls' access to education, without recognizing the need for gender-transformative education that provides a physically and psychologically safe space that supports all students' learning and both teaches and exercises critical thinking skills to enable both students and school staff to subvert inequity in and beyond the school. In her digital story, Joan describes the tragedy of losing her best friend, Gufasha Moureen, who died in childbirth at age 13 after a forced marriage **"to a 62 year old man who gave her family two cows for her."** Joan's digital story concludes by drawing attention to

6 UNESCO. School Violence and Bullying: Global Status Report. **https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246970**

both the girls who are out of school and those in school who need the support of a wholistic school system that advocates for them and their education:

> **"129 million girls are out of school. We are losing the future leaders, doctors, and philanthropists. But girls don't just need to go to school, education has to be supportive. My friend did not get the support she needed from school. Gender stereotypes allowed her to leave school without anybody advocating for her education. Gender transformative education requires everybody in the school and community to take responsibility for breaking barriers that limit girls' potential, including ending child marriage, and to empower girls instead."**

The participants' narratives collectively demonstrate the inadequacy of educational access alone in shifting gender norms and call for expanding the focus on education to be intentionally gender transformative in order to enhance gender equality. This requires intersectoral partnerships and extending beyond the school boundaries to challenge gender barriers in the community that are damaging children's education. As many of the digital stories identify, gender transformative education also necessitates acknowledging and addressing the ways in which gender intersects with other identity factors including ability, sexual orientation, location, and socioeconomic status, and ensuring that these stakeholders are accurately represented by people with relevant lived experiences. Participants identify youth voice as an integral component of this shift. Yande specifies that the vision of gender transformative education is not only enhanced by but actually requires **"centering young people and especially girls in this process"** for, as Damien affirms, **"no one is more expert than ourselves."**

Driving the Agenda

The participants demonstrate a wide range of valuable skills and capacities in relation to improving gender transformative education. They clearly challenge the perception that young activists are primarily valuable for raising awareness or providing energy or inspiration. While they ask more established stakeholders to support them in various ways (described later) and are grateful for the opportunities they have had, they also demonstrate they are not waiting for permission to begin. Some of them think big. For example, Yande identifies needing to "**deconstruct the system. I fully believe you just need to end the capitalist, racist, sexist, patriarchal, misogyny. All of the 'isms.'"** Yande, at age 15, became one of the first co-Chairs of the Transform Education network in an effort to do just that. Transform Education became an unprecedented network of youth-led activism for gender-transformative education and established a model of feminist youth leadership that, according to the participants, does genuinely banish "all of the 'isms'" within its network. Further, as Yande reflected after watching the digital stories screened within her group, **"I can't believe how much work we've done as a collective not just as Transform Education but in our individual capacities as activists and how much change we've created in this world."** The participants' narratives reflect how they take diverse and creative approaches to creating this change. While Yande from a young age has operated at a global stage pushing world leaders with her commanding presence, Maryada focuses her activism on grassroots and community-level organizing. Her digital story concludes with a clear message that, **"Activism starts by helping the person next door rather than waiting for a big platform to get started. By taking small steps you can have a big impact."**

The participants in this study are influencing every part of the education system; they are acting as teachers, nurses, and social workers, educating and collaborating with community leaders, bringing in experts to provide strategic guidance, providing services and supplies, amplifying youth voices, mentoring younger activists, hiring and training staff, advocating for increased budget allocations, and monitoring policy implementation. As Joan reflects, their efforts are creating tangible change in their communities: **"I see transformation because of my advocacy. Communities are more supportive of girls' education. Girls who had been married, given birth, or been rescued from marriage are returning to school, even after being out for a long time."** Participants are applying art-based, digital, and youth-friendly communication models to connect more effectively with other youth, many while still pursuing their own education. As Isabel explains in her digital story about challenging gender inequality in the STEM field:

> **"I did everything I could to help girls and gender non-conforming youth find their voice and lead in the technology industry. From speaking at conferences about my personal experiences in academia to doing social media and communications work for technology non-profits empowering gender minorities to running my own newsletter where I combined technology news with pop culture to appeal to a new generation, balancing my advocacy efforts, my own academic and personal responsibilities was hard but also immensely rewarding."**

Nga explains how her organization, **Mirror Mirror Vietnam**,[7] uses art-based and interactive approaches in its education activities, such as drawing, using clay, and playing games, because **"we don't want it to be boring."** Many participants remain closely connected

7 Youth Collective, "Youth Collective: For a Thriving Civil Society," accessed May 1, 2024, **https://youthcollective.restlessdevelopment.org/organisation/mirror-mirror-vietnam/**

to their communities, enabling them to reflect the perspectives of both young people and stakeholders at the local level, which several participants note is a perspective that many ministries of education and non-profits are lacking. Numerous participants also recount ingenious processes of problem-solving, often with limited resources, to support girls in their communities. Esther explains that her organization, **Center for Health Education and Vulnerable Support** (CHEVS), which describes itself as "young, African, and capable" with a vision to accelerate social inclusion for sexual and gender minorities,[8] has had to develop skill sets to counter a range of devastating circumstances faced by people they are supporting, including providing medication for people living with HIV and support for victims of corrective rape.[9] When asked how they knew how to provide some of these services, Esther explained that they just figured it out themselves:

> **"we realized that we were going to be first responders to different situations, so we needed to prepare ourselves and they were online. Most of the trainings that we could get were online trainings and during those trainings were able to build our network with actual professionals… I don't know how to put it because we did not go to any school. We just went online… I can't think of courses that I've taken off my head because there's so many and we had to do that of our own hands at the beginning. Because who is going to pay to train you to give out those services? So, we were taking courses."**

While many of the study participants describe having to figure out how to do their activism work on their own, several are trying to shift this process going forward so that they can better support the younger activists who will follow them. For example, Ngoc, also with Mirror Mirror Vietnam, has for the past 1.5 years been part of developing a national network called To Grow that builds feminist activist capacities, equipping its members **"with project management, emotional management and also, of course, gender equality knowledge."**

Many of the participants also described how, when confronting adversity either in relation to experiences of gender inequality or in relation to their activism work, they were motivated to provide for others the support they were lacking. In addition to awareness raising, Joan's organization, the **Gufasha Girls Foundation**,[10] and Maria's, **the Njeri Maria Foundation**,[11] provide capacity building to strengthen educational stakeholders' ability to support girls in ways that were missing in their own childhood experiences with education. Maria explains,

> **"At the Njeri Maria Foundation, we are leading interventions so that a child with a disability can go to school. We are building capacity of teachers and peers in school to be able to understand disability and how to teach students with disabilities, providing the necessary resources to accommodate**

8 Center for Health Education and Vulnerable Support (CHEVS), "CHEVS," accessed May 1, 2024, **https://chevs.org**

9 Corrective rape is a form of rape of perpetrated against someone on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. It is intended to force the victim to conform to heterosexuality or normative gender identity. From United Nations ESCWA, "Term: Corrective Rape," accessed May 1, 2024, **https://www.unescwa.org/sd-glossary/corrective-rape**

10 Gufasha Girls Foundation, "Gufasha Girls Foundation: Empowering Girls," accessed May 1, 2024, **https://gufashagirls.org**

11 Njeri Maria Foundation, "Home," accessed May 1, 2024, **https://njerimariafoundation.co.ke**

> them in schools. By providing rehabilitation, we guarantee girls with disabilities a fair chance in their education, which guarantees them a fair chance at economic empowerment and ultimately a decent life."

It is clear that these youth activists are not only recommending policy change, they are leading initiatives to instigate that change in practice. In some instances, the support they are providing to young activists reproduced support they had received from more established mentors. Many activists, however, described deep frustration in relation to their experiences speaking and acting as a young person within the halls of power.

The Realities of Youth Activism

A major source of concern among participants was the ongoing prevalence of performative practices regarding youth participation, most notably the tokenistic mobilization of their bodies to give a speech, be present at an event, or serve in an advisory role without demonstrating any commitment to actually hearing what they have to say and reflecting on how it may influence the organization's work. This was identified as occurring with government ministries and politicians, international non-government and civil society organizations, and private companies, and characterized by a lack of follow up engagement or response to the messages that youth activists delivered. Isabel explains:

> "… events like those, since they're always trying to cram so many youth activists from so many different networks and groups, each of us are given like 5 minutes. What can I say in 5 minutes that will be impactful enough to actually sway stakeholders and taking meaningful action? … it's very hard to know the impact that we're having without having more tangible data as to like, 'What are some steps that these stakeholders have done in response to what we've said?' Because a lot of times… you sort of just end the [event] and just move on and you never get to hear back from the people who organized the event and really talk about whether or not stakeholders have like responded or not."

Damien describes how this performative engagement happens not only in public facing events but in private meetings with youth activists as well, where the person sent to meet with youth activists does not have decision-making power and there is no follow up to indicate any outcome.

> "… when you tell them that there will be a meeting about this particular subject and there'll be young people and they want to listen to you, what happens is that they will say that they will come. You have [invited] the decision maker, but when you go to the actual meeting, you won't find the actual decision maker. If you needed a minister, you find that they brought a delegate, not even the principal secretary. Maybe the deputy. They will bring someone really of a lower position. Who would not even be able to make the decision. When you say, 'Can we make a decision?' they say, 'I will send it by the boss. So, I'm just collecting this information.' … But clearly the invitation was to say we need the Minister, we need the CEO, so that we can make decisions regarding youth affairs and they deliberately send delegates whom they know would not be able to even make decisions on their behalf. And that's where our frustration comes in."

Damien suggests this is an intentional obfuscation that enables the organization to indicate that they are listening without actually doing so. Yande also describes the opposite: public engagement with a

high-level figure in a government or organization, but the actual work they seek to influence is being carried out by lower-level bureaucrats or project managers that their messages never reach. This indicates the importance of meeting with appropriate stakeholders to achieve a given advocacy goal, but this is often outside youth activists' control.

The performativity described demonstrates that the discourse surrounding the involvement of youth voices serves as a badge of legitimacy and relevance for a program, as organizations are taking efforts to demonstrate that they are engaging young people without establishing any mechanisms for influence. Some youth activists further describe having their words edited or even provided to them so that their voices are being used to advance the organization's message and nothing else. As Farrah reflects,

> **"Often in our sphere, in development and education, it's becoming very performative. I remember one of my first experiences. I was like, 'OK, I gotta speak on this platform.' But they gave me a whole script and that just didn't make sense to me. What is the point?"**

Participants believe that practices of tokenism, manipulation, and performativity originate from a distrust of young people, where they are valued for their ability to energize or inspire but not to actually make or inform decisions or policy making. In spaces where actual decision making and strategic planning is occurring, young people often feel unwelcome. Mey, for example, feels that both her non-binary gender expression and her LGBTQ+ activism makes her unwelcome in many feminist activism circles. She describes:

> **"Working with other organizations, we meet with other people in the CSO sector. But sometimes they still think in the binary perspectives, for example, they just think about men and women … also focus on, you know, like straight men and straight woman. And, you know, not really [using] intersectionality lenses. The big frustration is that those people have the power position to influence the policies… I'm very sensitive so when I go to the meetings or conferences if there is any, you know, sexist joke or stereotype… OK, most of them resent to you. Sometimes those people also ignore us, they don't really want to talk with us or they don't really want to sit in the lunch table with us... I just feel like we are tokenism only."**

Participants critique established stakeholders, including other activists, as at times subverting the feminist and equity objectives they claim to espouse. Like Mey, Isabel describes feeling that shared feminist values were being contradicted even in spaces and by organizations that called themselves feminist. She said, **"we're judged for the things that we're not supposed to be like judged on, theoretically in these feminist spaces."** Nga further described an existential crisis where she had to weigh the value of reaching girls through funding sources or advocacy opportunities against the risk of selling out and compromising her identity and values. She told a story of preparing gender equity activities that would reach 300 students in rural Vietnam using interactive methods but, while they were delivering these activities, a partner from a large international NGO asked her to cover her hair, which had been dyed pink, so that she would look like what they deemed to be a respectable role model. She reflects,

> **"… this left me feeling disheartened. Especially as a feminist working in gender equality. We were invited to be the guest speaker to talk about gender based violence, to work for gender equality in collaboration with them. I believe such focus on appearances rather than the substance of our message doesn't resonate with the principles that we advocate for.**

> [Afterward,] they gave us feedback. But I did not feel we were in an equal position, it was more like they were telling us what to do and they told us that we were supposed to be the role models for the students. So, at that moment I asked them, 'What does it mean to be the role models for the students?' Is it [being] my true self that I want to advocate for or is it the role model that you're talking about, the appearances you want the girls to [embody by behaving] in a typical way that the school and government want… I understand they may have challenges working with the government. Sometimes they have to compromise the values… I felt like after the long term working with the government and working in education in Vietnam, I felt like they conform to the social norms… they changed. The gender equality they were talking about is not the gender equality we are talking about. Our values did not align."

In a subsequent focus group, Nga more explicitly expressed her fear that, as she got older and became a more successful activist, she too risked selling out and becoming part of the very system she was trying to challenge. She emphasizes the risk of losing focus on challenging systems of oppression, "if we don't speak to the root cause of the system and try to change it, then we will always circle in this loop we'll be in it forever." In a separate focus group, Damien spoke of his frustration with older stakeholders becoming less radical and less emotional in the face of ongoing oppression that they were supposedly challenging. He reflects,

> "… often times when you're going to these platforms or we're going to these meetings, only young people get mad. Only young people get frustrated. Only young people get demotivated. Only young people get disappointment. Why is it that young people are the only people who are having all these mixed reactions and mixed emotions and not the adults who are in that very same room?"

As Nga and Damien suggest, being overly emotional or radical in their various forms of expression is one of the reasons youth activists are being sidelined or dismissed. But, instead of feeling that they need to adapt to respond to this feedback, they identify those forms of expression as one of the elements that make youth voice so valuable. Their fear is not that they are being held back by their radical perspective but that eventually, with time, experience, and success, they will lose it.

Transform Education

Fed up with operating within systems that are dismissive of youth voices and perspectives, the youth activists within Transform Education have created an alternative approach to engaging in youth-led feminist activism. This is most centrally realized within the organization and operation of the Transform Education network which was intentionally created to be a space where young people could operate and advocate the way they wanted to. They are housed within UNGEI, which Yande describes as their "mother organization" and who they strategically advise but are not subservient to. She explains:

> "we wanted a user coalition to advise UNGEI about their work with young people. And we wanted to be separate. We wanted to be independent, but at the same time we recognize the leveraging power that UNGEI had as a United Nations organization."

Transform Education is considered by participants to be genuinely youth-led, meaning that its youth members are the ones making all major decisions and influencing programming at all levels. It values a collaborative and networked approach to activism

and seeks to incorporate a wide range of voices so that they can embody diverse representation. As Mey says, **"… if it is about people with a disability, it should be people with disability who tell their own stories. If it is a space for LGBT people, it should be the LGBT community who speak or share their experiences."** This necessitates the embodiment of a diverse and global youth network that operates collaboratively and centres the experiences of different activists as appropriate. They further seek to mobilize equitable participation that recognizes barriers to participants from marginalized identities such as refugees who cannot travel outside of their country because the host government will not issue travel documents permitting refugees to travel.

Participants describe the features of Transform Education's operation as living up to its feminist values. For example, Farrah repeatedly described Transform Education as operating within **"a flat hierarchy,"** which she explains as:

> **"we don't have a CEO and then, you know, a manager. And then, like, workers. Everybody works on the same level. Everybody has the same choices, the same opportunities, the same freedom in how they do their work and what work they do. What we really have is kind of a guiding group that helps us understand and … make sure that Transform Education's practices are going. You have the guiding group and then you have coordinators that help you carry out your work. For example, I ran a SRGBV working group and there's 6 to 7 other working groups as well. So, we have our own choices. We can navigate our own working groups, hold our own activities, and the guiding group is just kind of helping us track whether our work is supporting the principles and the plans of Transform Education as an organization."**

Yande further explains that, instead of distancing themselves from emotion, they center it. She references the book Joyful Militancy,[12] which they learned about in the 'feminist school' that they operated through the network.[13] She explains that joyful militancy **"essentially means the only way we can change this world is if we focus on the aspects of joy involved in advocacy and not just the fact that we're fighting another battle."** While Yande and Farrah are directly involved in Transform Education's operation and decision-making, other activists not as directly involved in its governance also described feeling empowered as a result of their involvement in Transform Education. Mey explains, **"Joining the Transform Education network brought further inspiration, since I got to connect with other feminists around the world, feeling a sense of solidarity and becoming part of something bigger than myself."**

Farrah introduced the term **'radical sisterhood'** to describe the feminist community she discovered through her activism work. This concept characterizes the sense of purpose-driven community, in which its participants have a shared focus and intensity related to ending patriarchy but also to doing so while supporting and caring for each other and embracing their wholistic humanity. Participants describe how finding other feminist activists was both grounding and invigorating, helping them to label and understand their experiences and begin to understand how to influence change. Maya and Esther indicate that finding feminist activist communities, including Transform Education, were personally transformative:

12 Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery, **Joyful Militancy** (California: AK Press, 2017).

13 Gender at Work, "Feminist School: An Experiential Learning Experience for Young Feminists," Gender at Work Institute, Accessed May 1, 2024, **https://www.genderatworkinstitute.org/courses/course-v1:gender-at-work-campus+FS101+2021_P1/about**

> **"From this activism, I met a lot of people who eventually became my support system."** *(Maya)*

> **"Activism became my lifeline, and feminism my guiding light."** *(Esther)*

A central benefit of the network is the sense of an international feminist community it has created by connecting hundreds of feminist youth activists across the world. Many participants identified that they were initially exposed to the values and practices of feminism by progressive women in their families, often working hard to encourage them to pursue the opportunities they had not had. For example, Maya says:

> **"I grew up hearing that girls don't need to be highly educated. People around me said, "Girls don't need to be highly educated, it's better to just learn to cook so they can be good wives." However, my mother, who had faced limitations on her education due to an early marriage said, "You can't be like me. Women need to have higher education so they can be independent and empowered.""**

Yet it was through activism that participants often came to understand and identify with the feminist label and objectives. Part of the unique value of Transform Education comes from its intergenerational nature, both in the sense of connecting young feminist activists with younger or less experienced ones, as Isabel describes:

> **"… even though Transform Education is for young feminist activists, there's people going through different stages of life and their activism. For me, when I first joined Transform Education, that was when I was just finishing high school and now I'm in college, and I know that there was people that I've met in Transform Education who are still beginning high school that are a few years younger than me. And there are also activists that are a couple years older than me. I think having that difference in age, even though all of us are young feminist activists, sort of gives me a perspective as to things that I can think about as I grow up or things that I would like to have a different perspective on."**

Another component of the community fostered through Transform Education is the experience of intergenerational collaboration with more established feminist activists and organizers who value their voices and meaningfully support them while also respecting their leadership and independence. The participants have tangible recommendations for how stakeholders who want to invest in and support young feminist activists can do so while avoiding the performative participation practices that they find so frustrating.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First and foremost, they identify the need for **funding youth-led organizations** and for funding opportunities to **incorporate mentorship** or **capacity building** programs that will enhance participants' project management skills. Many participants identified a lack of funding as a major barrier to doing the kind of advocacy that they want to. Maryada says **"we [run] many projects on like zero budget based approach. But yeah, funding is the main problem. We cannot expand the project as we want because… our organization is student led."** Maya further describes the lengths youth activists go to enable their youth activism to occur:

> **"Even though I started my activism with the government… we still do not have enough funding to run all the program. I ended up having to fund it myself and sell chips when I was in junior high school… most of the times our activism and grassroots movements are funded by us (children) collectively."**

While lack of funding is a common challenge among many civil society organizations, youth-led organizations face additional challenges in this respect because of the lack of trust in their capacities, particularly when it comes to managing budgets. When there are funding opportunities specifically for youth organizations, they are very small scale and short term.

Participants strongly argue that funding opportunities for youth activists be accompanied by mentorship in relation to project management and financial planning and accountability to build youth capacity to independently manage and operate larger projects. As Joan says, **"I am doing this work from a sense of passion in my heart, but it's not something that I [could start from] there. It's not that I know so much about project planning and management. I do not even know monitoring and evaluation."** As Joan identifies, many of youth activists may have an innate sense of passion that drives their activism work, but that does not mean they can naturally acquire the project planning and implementation skills needed to make their visions a reality.

In some instances, participants such as Maya and Ngoc are delivering these forms of mentorship and connection to funding opportunities to other young activists, providing the kind of mentorship they saw lacking in their own experiences. Maryada participates in a formal mentorship program operated by Dior and UNESCO,[14] where a team of mentees from around the world develop and launch a project and are coached throughout the process, pitching their idea and getting impact with funding and ongoing mentorship for the project's duration for the top three projects. But innovative mentorship models like this are uncommon in the participants' experience and more often they are, as Esther explains in an earlier quote, figuring it out as they go. Esther cautions, however, that subject specific training has to be relevant, involving facilitators from the Global South or the specific region they are working in who understand the challenges. She describes receiving guidance from training sessions offered by international organizations on sexual and reproductive health and rights that was irrelevant in the Nigerian context where she was operating, where abortion and homosexuality are illegal.

14 Women@Dior and UNESCO, "Mentorship and Education Program,"Women@Dior, last modified 2022, https://womenatdior.com

Beyond funding and mentorship, participants ask partners to use their positions of power and privilege to **amplify their voices**. Maya gives an example of when this happened for her:

> **"When I was 15, I was the only child, wearing my school uniform in a room full of adults with government uniforms. My youth mentor accompanied me to a deliberation of regional development plans. I raised my hand so many times, but the secretary… didn't allow me to talk at all. Until my youth mentor, he raised his hand and the secretary *immediately* let him talk. But my youth mentor passed it to me."**

They not only call on partners to create opportunities for them to connect to larger platforms and powerful stakeholders but for **sustained opportunities for influence** and engagement that extend beyond single events. They want to know the outcomes of their involvement and understand how their engagement has been influential. Esther points to Education Shifts Power,[15] a pilot small grants program for feminist youth-led organizations hosted by UNGEI and Plan International, as an example of meaningful youth engagement. She explains that, as part of the Education Shifts Power Consortium,

> **"we were part of the process of everything that was going on… We were able to say how the question should come up.. [then] when we saw the ground questions and the application, it felt like, 'Ohh, this reflected what we thought…' We were involved in every part of the process and it's not always like that."**

They want to know the outcomes of their involvement and understand how their engagement has been influential. Other mechanisms they recommend are advisory positions or paid employment that come with voting rights and decision making opportunities, not just tokenistic representation.

Participants call for multiple young people to be involved as youth representatives so that **diverse and accurate representation** is possible and one activist is not expected to speak on behalf of all youth. Damien advises as a general principle to

> **"ensure that no one is in the room speaking for the other…. Have refugees speaking for refugees. When we are speaking about things for people living with disabilities, for instance, have a person of disabilities speaking because they speak from a lived experience, from a practical experience, and they're able to relate and share their own stories."**

They point out that both participation and capacity building opportunities need to be accessible and equitable for eligible youth activists. Maya and Esther both observe that many fellowship programs are often only accessible to the same group of young people, most often in urban settings and with an established record of education and accomplishments, while the young activists who most need guidance are often shut out. Damien describes how he is often invited to participate

> **"because I have a powerful voice, extensive advocacy experience, and strong knowledge. Also, because I am a refugee and speak directly from lived experiences. But because of the same, I faced many**

15 UNESCO, "Education Shifts Power," United Nations Girls Education Initiative. Accessed May 17, 2024. https://www.ungei.org/what-we-do/education-shifts-power#:~:text=Education%20Shifts%20Power%20is%20a,a%20new%20grant%2Dmaking%20offer

travel restrictions and do not attend any events outside Malawi. I attend online while everyone else is in the room."

These tangible recommendations all begin with the premise of genuinely valuing youth voices and mobilizing power and influence to expand opportunities to make their voices heard in ways that will affect change. Stakeholders can look to the example these participants' organizations are setting in their support for girls and younger activists, enacting the kind of support they hope to receive themselves. Transform Education is an avenue where they have systematized intergenerational collaboration with UNGEI, who provides Transform Education with a website and resources to operate their network, creating platforms and opportunities for Transform Education members to speak without dictating their messages for them. Yet youth activists are hungry for support from other organizations as well, particularly at regional and national levels, who will support their unique capacities without asking them to compromise their values.

CONCLUSION

In responding to the central research question, "how can youth feminist activists enhance their impact on gender transformative education?" it is apparent that the clearest path for deepening impact lies not in shifting or deepening their activities, but rather in guiding educational stakeholders to how they can more effectively engage the incredible capacities of the youth activists as respected partners. **Key elements involve sustained engagement, feedback on the outcomes of youth participation, and access to funding, mentorship, and the people and spaces where decisions are being made.** The Transform Education network has succeeded in fostering a youth-led feminist platform that connects young feminist activists around the world, enabling them to learn from and support each other. Their narratives of activism, as well as the reasons that they turned to activism in the first place, demonstrate the urgent need for more funding and attention to the concept of gender transformative education, moving beyond educational access and parity toward wholistic and systemic approaches that position education as a vehicle for social change from a transformative perspective. These findings arrive at a time when many feminist activists are struggling to confront growing backlash against the achievement of rights for girls, women, and LGBTQ+ people, making the feminist community created by the Transform Education network an even more critical source of strategic support.

The digital storytelling methodology provided participants the opportunity to control the narrative, writing the script and selecting the images for their stories so that they have the opportunity to speak directly through the research, in addition to the researchers' analysis of the body of digital stories and focus group transcripts, which participants have the opportunity to inform and validate. This emphasis on the participants' ownership and control was particularly important given the research team's location in the Global North, while the participants were all born and most still live and work primarily in the Global South. Unlike this report, which seeks to describe the most significant findings across all the stories and focus groups, the digital stories tell each activist's individual story. Readers are strongly encouraged to watch them (**https://ed4genderjustice.ca/leading-change/**) to better understand the participants' perspectives in their own words.

A concern that the research team had from several early experiences sharing some of the digital stories within Global North contexts is the reflection that those in Canada or North America (where the research team is located) should be grateful to live where they do. These comments reinforce discourses that position girls in the Global South as victims in need of assistance, in contrast to girls in the Global North, who are seen as equal, educated, and empowered.[16,17] Our team's main takeaway from the digital stories, however, is that they document the incredible agency and strength of the participants and that gender transformative education is highly relevant and needed across a wide range of diverse country and cultural contexts. A limitation of this study has therefore been the lack of recruitment of youth feminist activists for gender transformative education from the Global North, where gender-based violence

16 E.g., Karishma Desai, "Teaching the Third World Girl: Girl Rising as a Precarious Curriculum of Empathy," *Curriculum Inquiry* 46, no. 3 (May 2016): 248-264, **http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2016.1173510**

17 E.g., Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill, "The Revolution Will Be Led By a 12-Year-Old Girl': Girl Power and Global Biopolitics," *Feminist Review* 105 (2013): 83-102. **https://www.jstor.org/stable/24571900**

and discrimination within education systems is also prevalent.[18,19] More targeted recruitment of youth feminist activists from across the Global North and South could demonstrate that gender transformative education is still urgently needed in all countries around the world.

The power of cross-border connection, including the connections built through this research, showed that youth feminist activists are actively challenging and subverting expectations that girls and young people, particularly those in the Global South, should accept the status quo and the perpetuation of oppression. They have a critical voice that they are unafraid to use even in relation to the practices of powerful global stakeholders. The findings demonstrate that, even while gender backlash emerges around the world, feminist activism and organizing is growing and evolving, with youth activists often leading the way. They are doing so in part by building their own organizations, networks, and platforms, such as Transform Education, when they get tired of waiting.

18 E.g., Adam A. Rogers, McKay Boyack, Rachel E. Cook, and Emma Allen, "School Connectedness and STEM Orientation in Adolescent Girls: The Role of Perceived Gender Discrimination and Implicit Gender-Science Stereotypes," *Sex Roles* 85 (2021): 405–421 **https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-021-01224-7**

19 E.g., Tracey Peter, Christopher Campbell, and Catherine Taylor, *Still in Every Class in Every School*, Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, accessed May 1, 2024, **https://egale.ca/awareness/still-in-every-class/**

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