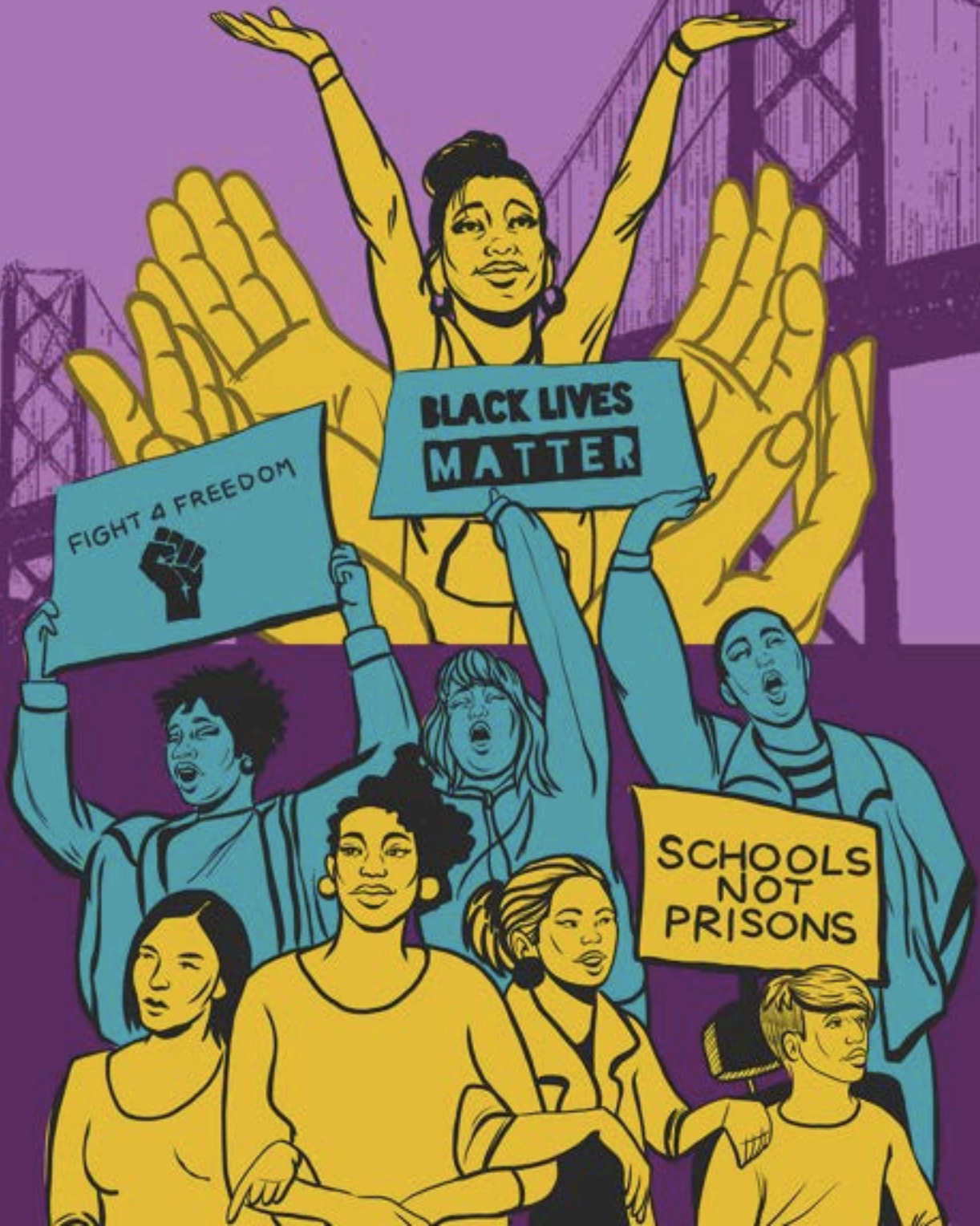


# Together, We Rise

The Lived Experiences of Girls of Color in Oakland, San Francisco, and San Jose





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Cover image designed by Tanya Linn Albrigtsen-Frable (Mensen). Tanya designed the artwork for the report inspired by the community maps drawn by listening session participants, as well as input from the Young Women's Leadership Board and Alliance for Girls' staff.

The design and layout of the report was done by Marium Qureshi.

# *Together, We Rise*

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## LETTER FROM **THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

♦  
*Emma Mayerson*

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Dear Friends,

Alliance for Girls (AFG) is proud to present the *Together, We Rise* report. The title of this report was developed by the girl<sup>1</sup> leaders who designed and led this project. They were inspired by Maya Angelou's poem "Still, I Rise." In her poem, Angelou talks about thriving despite hate and despite challenges—much like the girls we learned from throughout the listening sessions.

As this report illustrates, barriers facing girls today are immense. Girls are fighting against the headwinds of a system that has for centuries silenced women's and girls' voices, exploited the free labor of women and people of color, and controlled the expression of gender and sexuality. These realities are not only unjust, they are setting us up for failure. Studies have shown that greater gender equality can enhance economic productivity, improve development outcomes for the next generation, make institutions and policies more representative, and provide a powerful solution for climate change mitigation.<sup>2</sup>

Over the last decade, AFG, the nation's largest alliance of girls' organizations, has fostered a strong community of girls' champions<sup>3</sup>, equipped with the tools, information, and networks needed to support girls and advance solutions for gender and racial equity. In doing this work, AFG has honed a unique and effective model for enabling collective strategies to advance more equitable communities. We do not focus on a single silver-bullet solution. Rather, we galvanize every solution and every solver toward radically reshaping our society and creating new systems that center on and champion those on the margins. This model is grounded on three key principles: that those closest to the problems are closest to the solutions, that diverse leadership is more effective leadership, and that the collective is powerful.

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<sup>1</sup> "Girl" refers to gender-expansive youth: cis girls, trans girls, nonbinary youth, gender nonconforming youth, genderqueer youth, and any girl-identified youth.

<sup>2</sup> In *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*, girls' education and voluntary family planning are identified as top-ten climate change mitigation solutions, and, according to the World Bank's 2012 World Development Report Gender Equality and Development, greater gender equality can enhance economic productivity, improve development outcomes for the next generation, and make institutions and policies more representative.

<sup>3</sup> "Champions" refers to staff of girl-serving organizations, and individuals who are girls' advocates and educators.

We embody our model through our approach. AFG employs participatory action research methods because those most impacted by systemic injustice are also those best positioned to frame, ask, and address the questions that lead to solutions. With a clear understanding of girls' greatest barriers and opportunities, AFG mobilizes girls' champions from across sectors, geographies, and communities to amplify and codesign solutions to girls' greatest challenges and advocate for the dismantling of systemic barriers to girls' success.

In January 2019, AFG unveiled a new mission, vision, and strategic plan. The plan was informed by 100 key stakeholders and led by a multi-sector team of girls' champions. AFG centered girls' voices in the process by analyzing data from this report and three other reports in the Lived Experiences of Girls research series commissioned and led by AFG.

AFG is proud to present our new mission: to mobilize girls' champions to address barriers facing girls, create conditions for their success, and advance systemic change to achieve equity. The need to achieve gender and racial equity is urgent—for the sake of our planet, our democracy, and our communities. Those with solutions can no longer afford to operate at the fringes of society, in underfunded organizations or isolated within their communities. Gender and racial equity solutions and solvers must be centered within the broader systems that impact girls' lives. That is why, as part of our new strategic plan, we are launching the Girls Policy Agenda and a corresponding comprehensive advocacy strategy that will mobilize girls and their champions to advance collective and systemic transformation.

We are honored to contribute a girl centered and led report to the series of community reports produced for the National Philanthropic Collaborative of Young Women's Initiatives. This report would not have been possible without the support of many individuals and organizations. I would like to thank the Women's Foundation of California; the National Philanthropic Collaborative of Young Women's Initiatives; Alliance for Girls' members, including the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, The Respect Institute, Girls Inc. of Alameda County, Oasis for Girls, Planned Parenthood Mar Monte, the Santa Clara Office of Women's Policy, the San Francisco Department on the Status of Women, Mission Girls, Dimensions Dance Theater; and the extraordinary young women who led and participated in this project. We are also thankful to the 256 girl leaders and champions that supported in the translation of the research into action. Together, we can make the dreams of girls in the Bay Area become realities.

In community,



EMMA MAYERSON  
*Founding Executive Director*  
*Alliance for Girls*



## LETTER FROM THE CEO

Surina Khan

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Dear Reader,

The Women's Foundation of California (WFC) is honored to support, fund, and partner in this groundbreaking work based on the lived experiences of girls of color in the San Francisco Bay Area. The *Together, We Rise* report was developed by girl-led community driven research in partnership between WFC and Alliance for Girls. I'm especially proud that this report is being released during our anniversary as the Foundation celebrates 40 years of feminists investing, training and connecting to advance racial, gender and economic justice. The report compiled by more than 60 girls of color in the region offers eye-opening and inspiring information about their daily struggles, their dreams to build a brighter present and future and their recommendations for change.

As one of the first in the country led by and for women and girls, the WFC is committed to centering the voices of women and girls from low-income communities, immigrant communities, queer communities and communities of color. The findings in this new report does just that. It's my hope that it will be a call to action to invest now in leadership and lives of young women and improve development outcomes for the next generation.

I would like to thank the National Philanthropic Collaborative of Young Women's Initiatives (NPCYWI) who helped to make the *Together, We Rise* report possible. Through the NPCYWI we are among eight women's foundations across the country (MN, NY, TX, TN, DC, AL, MA) working to advance gender, racial and economic justice. Over the next several years, the collaborative will give out more than \$40 million in grants to ensure that young women are equipped with the tools and opportunity to lead and to thrive.

This powerful report underscores the importance of shaping a just and equitable California for women and girls of color across our state. I am optimistic that upon reading first-hand accounts from a coordinated series of listening sessions designed by and for girls you will be moved to support the gender justice movement. The time is now to invest, train and connect more community leaders -- particularly young women and girls of color to uplift and empower them to disrupt the cycle of poverty, violence and disinvestment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Surina". The signature is fluid and cursive.

SURINA KHAN  
CEO

*The Women's Foundation of California*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Alliance for Girls would like to thank the young women and girls who led this work and shared their personal stories, thoughts, and recommendations with us. Without them, this report would not have been possible and our work would not have the impact it has had in shaping opportunities for girls in our communities. We would also like to thank the people and organizations who hosted listening sessions and community report-back meetings, shared their expertise, and supported with outreach: Erin Ceynar; Casey Farmer; Sera Fernando; Roxana Perez; Michelle Tran at the Bill Wilson Center; the National Coalition of 100 Black Women; Courtney Macavinta at The Respect Institute; Kimberly Bradley, Sade Powell, and Courtney Johnson Clendinen at Girls Inc. of Alameda County; Elisabeth Gutiérrez and Wendy Calimag at Oasis for Girls; Chuck Brookhart Brown at Orion Advising; Jenna Peterson and Jeanette Marazzo at Planned Parenthood Mar Monte; Julie Ramirez at the Santa Clara Office of Women's Policy; Dr. Emily Murase and Galina Yudovich at the San Francisco Department on the Status of Women; Susana Rojas and Gloria Dominguez at Mission Girls; and Latanya Tigner and Deborah Vaughan at Dimensions Dance Theater.

The report's primary authors are Raquel Donoso, consultant; Livier Gutiérrez, Director of Programs, Alliance for Girls; Marium Qureshi, Research and Program Fellow, Alliance for Girls. Support with secondary data collection was provided by Brenda Diaz, Research and Program Fellow, Alliance for Girls. Members of Alliance for Girls' Young Women's Leadership Board served as coordinators, researchers, and leaders in this work, supporting the data collection, analysis, review, and editing of the report: Gabrielle Battle, Maren Frye, Esme Kalbag, Anna Sara Mehouelley, Sofia Orduña, Sasha Williams, and Andrea Zamora. Founding Executive Director Emma Mayerson and Director of Programs Livier Gutiérrez supervised the production of the report.

This report was made possible through the funding, partnership, and support of the National Philanthropic Collaborative of Young Women's Initiatives and the Women's Foundation of California. We would especially like to thank the Women's Foundation of California's Chief Executive Officer Surina Khan, Program Officer Rhiannon Rossi, and Chief Strategist Bia Vieira. Additional support was provided by The Peggy and Jack Baskin Foundation, the Akonadi Foundation, The California Endowment, and Kaiser Permanente.





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## FOREWARD

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Since 2012, Alliance for Girls (AFG) has been transforming the girls' service sector from one of siloed, single-issue organizations and agencies into a coordinated, collective alliance with the necessary complexity and collective power to holistically meet girls' needs and eliminate systemic barriers to their success. As the nation's largest alliance of girls' organizations, including nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and schools, AFG's members serve more than 300,000 girls and young women in the San Francisco Bay Area. An economic as well as a social force, AFG members employ 2,500 people, motivate over 6,000 volunteers, and collect over \$200 million in revenue annually. AFG mobilizes girls' advocates and educators to address barriers facing girls, create conditions for their success, and advance systemic change to achieve equity. AFG's mission is grounded in the belief that those closest to a problem—in this case girls and their champions—are closest to the solution.

To advance its mission, AFG has produced a series of research reports on the lived experiences of girls<sup>1</sup> of color. The Lived Experiences of Girls series centers and elevates the experiences of girls as agents of systemic change through the Meeting Girls' Needs Initiative (MGNI) model. MGNI is a system change model spearheaded by AFG in partnership with its members, girls, families, and system and community stakeholders. MGNI starts with a research and design process led by women and girls of color. Research produced through the Lived Experiences of Girls series is intended to provide AFG, its members and partners, and the Bay Area community with the data needed to increase coordination and collaboration between organizations and advance policies, practices, and programs that are informed and led by girls. *Together, We Rise* is the fourth installment in the Lived Experiences of Girls series. Through this series, we have now documented and amplified the lived experiences of 276 girls of color across the San Francisco Bay Area.

This report was also produced to inform the San Francisco Bay Area work of the National Philanthropic Collaborative of Young Women's Initiatives, a national initiative of eight women foundations committed to galvanizing and investing resources to amplify the collective power of cis and trans young women and improve their lives and outcomes: Washington Area Women's Foundation, The New York Women's Foundation, Women's Foundation for a Greater Memphis, Women's Foundation of Minnesota, Texas Women's Foundation, Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts, and the Women's Foundation of California. As a partner of the Women's Foundation of California in this initiative, AFG received funding and support to create a report led by and for cis and trans girls that elevates their experiences and especially the experiences of girls of color in the San Francisco Bay Area. *Together, We Rise* is the outcome of this work.

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, "girls" refers to self-female-identified middle- or high-school-age youth of color.

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## INTRODUCTION

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In 2018, there were 793,232 girls under the age of 18 living in the nine counties of the San Francisco Bay Area, a region that boasts nearly double the nation's average median income (Kids Data, 2018). San Francisco and San Jose, however, also have two of the highest income gaps in the country. A household of four earning six figures can still qualify as low-income, indicating just how expensive the cost of living in the Bay Area has become. In fact, only 23% of households in the Bay can afford a median priced home, as compared to 57% nationwide (Bay Area Market Reports, 2018; Pender, 2018). One of the main reasons for the growing wealth gap is the influx of tech companies, which has resulted in opportunity, investments, and diversity for communities (Kendall, 2018). The region, however, also serves as a dichotomous backdrop for the girls of color growing up here: wealth and poverty are juxtaposed, often within a couple feet of each other, and opportunities are bound by inequitable access. As such, the hundreds of thousands of girls navigating the overlapping systems in the Bay Area face unique challenges in their day-to-day lives. Alliance for Girls seeks to understand these challenges in order to mobilize an informed, collaborative approach to widespread change.

Previous research conducted and commissioned by Alliance for Girls focused on girls' lives in Oakland and San Francisco public schools, as well as in public spaces in Oakland. As we heard from girls of color, we started to identify patterns in their stories. We heard overlapping experiences of both successes and struggles, experiences that extended past the school system, and so we began this report in order to better understand girls' lives in their communities. *Together, We Rise* highlights the lived experiences of girls of color in the Bay Area<sup>1</sup> in the communities they live and operate in. By elevating their voices, this report puts girls at the forefront, deepening our understanding of the ways in which they experience the world around them, illuminating their needs across the region, and informing policy recommendations that provide responsive resources and support and create the foundations for systemic change.

Alliance for Girls believes that those closest to the problems are closest to the solutions, and, therefore, between February and July

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<sup>1</sup> For this project, "the Bay Area" was defined as the cities of Oakland, Richmond, San Francisco, and San Jose.

2018, Alliance for Girls coordinated a series of listening sessions designed by and for girls of color using Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). With training and support from Raquel Donoso, Livier Gutiérrez, Marium Qureshi, and the Women's Foundation of California, Alliance for Girls' Young Women's Leadership Board planned and led each session, ensuring that girls of color were engaged as equal partners.

This report used the social-ecological model, intersectional feminist theory, and transformational resistance to highlight how various systems influence girls and how girls are influencing systems in return, focusing on and elevating girls' complex day-to-day experiences as they shared them with their peers and Alliance for Girls. The theoretical framework, methodology, analysis, findings, and recommendations are structured around what girls told us. They defined what "community" means to them, mapping out sources of support and areas of concern. They told us how their identities—including income, race, gender, immigration status, and motherhood—determine the level of oppression and hostility they experience as a result of systems of oppression in different spheres of their daily lives, be it in classrooms or on sidewalks, at home or on social media. More importantly, the girls told us about their power. They spoke of how they impact or want to impact the systems they engage with, creating change for themselves, their peers, their families, and their communities.

What we learned was equal parts inspiring and heartbreaking: despite experiencing daily microaggressions, overt aggression, and violence when navigating the spaces that make up their communities—school, home, community-based organizations, as well as virtual and public spaces—girls of color in the Bay Area are perpetually rising. They rise above hate and discrimination, influencing and enacting their power and holding on to their dreams. They rise together—with the support of their peers, families, and mentors—challenging the negative perceptions placed on them with complex views and understandings of themselves and their surrounding communities. They are rising and thriving with dreams to build a better and brighter present and future for themselves and others. Across Oakland, San Jose, and San Francisco, we heard from a total of 63 girls who shared their struggles, their dreams, and their recommendations for change.

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## FRAMEWORK

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The framework for the report arose through the design of the project and methodical gathering and analysis of data collected at listening sessions. It started with grounded theory. As we listened and heard from girls in the research coordinator team and at the listening sessions, a framework arose.

This report is framed and guided by three independent but interconnected lenses: the Social Ecological Model (SEM), intersectionality, and transformational resistance. SEM serves as a central lens for understanding the relationships and connections among various personal and environmental factors and the impact of these on individual outcomes and experiences. SEM recognizes that individual behavior is shaped by the social environment and that to intervene and change negative outcomes it is imperative to develop strategies at each band of influence, which include the individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988). Intersectionality is a critical lens for understanding the complex interconnection of identity and structures of power. It recognizes that individuals who live at the margins—based on intersecting factors such as race, gender, class, immigration status, and sexuality—experience oppression in unique ways (Crenshaw, 1991).

Despite social, educational, and economic constraints, individuals and communities resist inequities. Transformational resistance is one lens for understanding how communities oppose social structures and build power for social change. Transformational resistance occurs when people critique oppression and seek social justice, understanding that individual and collective change is attainable. This resistance is based in validating the experiences of underrepresented communities, challenging dominant ideologies, centralizing intersectionality, and having a commitment to social justice (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Alone, these frameworks capture only parts of an individual's experience in systems of power and oppression. Together, they provide a holistic understanding of a person's experience, as well as of key levers for change.

In *Together, We Rise*, SEM, intersectionality, and transformative resistance frame the presentation and analysis of existing work written about girls, as well as research findings, methods, and recommendations for change. SEM highlights the spheres of influence that impact girls' daily experiences and outcomes, as well as the strategies and approaches of how to address issues and enact change within each sphere of influence. This is all done while centralizing intersectionality at the core of the lives of girls and their experiences within different spheres of influence, as well as recognizing and elevating the ways girls resist interpersonal interactions and systems in order to advance broader social change.



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## LITERATURE REVIEW

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In the listening sessions, girls identified the ways structural and systemic barriers impact their self-identities, social media, home lives, schools, public spaces, and community-based organizations as important systems in their lives. To contextualize girls' experiences, a review of existing work written on girls in these spheres was conducted. This review included reports published in academic journals (hereafter, academic literature). The review also included research reports led by community organizations (hereafter, community literature) on the needs of girls of color. These two sources of information tell a consistent story: girls of color struggle in many areas of their lives, and yet find ways to thrive; and there is a need for additional research and information on girls' experiences and needs.

### Academic Literature

The academic literature on girls and self-perception focuses to a great degree on body image. Data from in-depth interviews with 27 Latina girls reveal that girls overwhelmingly believe that there is an ideal body type in their culture—slender yet curvy. This belief is derived from friends' opinions, boys' perceived preferences, community norms, and social media (Romo, Mireles-Rios, & Hurtado, 2016). Among African American girls, they shared that "There is little appreciation and positive reification for African American beauty. This lack of appreciation can have a devastating effect on self-esteem" (Patton, 2006, p. 38).

Although nascent, the academic literature on social media and girls finds a strong correlation between social media usage and exposure and negative body image. Social media use has been consistently and positively associated with negative body image for girls (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Ferguson, Muñoz, Garza, & Galindo, 2014). It has also been associated with peer competition among girls (Ferguson et al., 2014). Social media can, nonetheless, serve as a tool of support and resistance. For LGBTQ youth, social media is associated with providing space for resilience, including space to learn, feel stronger, fight back, and find and foster community (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015; Fox & Ralston, 2016). It also provides the resources and community to learn and teach about identity (Fox & Ralston, 2016).

The academic literature on girls' home lives heavily centers around girls' roles within the family. Gendered and cultural expectations often require female adolescents to take on responsibilities of household management and caregiving (Dodson & Dickert, 2004). In their decade-long meta-analysis, Dodson and Dickert (2004) found that when young girls, typically from low-income immigrant families, are forced to take on significant responsibilities at home, their ability to take advantage of opportunities that would lead to their long-term well-being is hindered. Among African American girls, Chandra and Batada (2006) found that parental stress and the well-being of siblings and other family members were sources of worry.

The academic literature on girls' families also explores the value and complexity of family relationships. Family is often a source of strength and support for girls of color. For example, a positive mother-daughter relationship serves as a protective factor against low self-esteem, stress, depression, and suicidality (Baumann, Kuhlberg, & Zayas, 2010). Among young Latina mothers, grandmothers play a major role in caregiving (Bravo, Umaña-Taylor, Zeiders, Updegraff, & Jahromi, 2016). At the same time, incongruent attitudes toward teenage pregnancy between caregiving grandmothers and young mothers can create conflict, resulting in lower perceived social support and higher stress levels (Bravo et al., 2016). For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth, family acceptance is associated with greater self-esteem, social support, and general health status; it also protects against depression, substance abuse, homelessness, and suicidal ideation and behaviors (Robinson, 2018; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010).

The academic literature on girls of color in school finds that school is not a welcoming place. Girls of color face differential academic and disciplinary outcomes (Kemp-Graham, 2018). Across the nation, African American girls are disproportionately penalized and have the highest rates of suspension compared to all racial and ethnic groups (Kemp-Graham, 2018). Research has found inconsistent implementation of discipline policies, which negatively affects girls of color and results in consequences such as the loss of instruction time. In fact, some studies argue that schools are an institution in

the lives of girls of color, especially Black girls, that incites anger and resistance (Wun, 2016). Contributing to this issue is the fact that administration officials are often ill-equipped to understand the experiences of girls, particularly with intersectional violence, or support their agency (Wun, 2016). This lack of support results in school climates that do little to advance girls' achievement, sense of safety, and feeling of connectedness. This is particularly true for Black and Hispanic girls (Ochoa, 2015; Voight, Hanson, O'Malley, & Adekanye, 2015). Black and Hispanic students have less favorable experiences of safety, connectedness, relationships with adults, and opportunities for participation as compared to white students (Voight et al., 2015).

Academic literature on girls' experiences of public spaces elevates the issue of safety for girls. Street harassment is a major issue for girls of color. Girls of color are particularly vulnerable to verbal and physical assault, especially in neighborhoods of extreme social and economic disadvantage (Logan, 2015). For Black women and girls, inhabiting public spaces can result in death, even in seemingly innocuous situations, given the inherent discrimination and racism present due to the long-standing white control of mobility and movement (Towns, 2016).

### Community Literature

In addition to the academic literature, it is important to acknowledge and center this report in expertise and research led by community. The National Philanthropic Collaborative of Young Women's Initiatives issued a series of reports on the needs of cis and trans girls of color across the United States. These reports include *New York City Young Women's Initiative Report and Recommendations*, *Young Women's Initiative of Minnesota's Blueprint for Action*, and the Washington Area Women's Foundation's *A Blueprint for Action: Supporting Young Women of Color in the District of Columbia*. Similarly, Alliance for Girls and its members have produced research on the experiences of girls of color, including both cis and trans girls, in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Most of the Young Women's Initiative reports identified similar areas of concern for girls. These areas of concern include economic stability and work, safety and violence, health and well-being, and education. The Minnesota and Washington, D. C., reports included family and self-

identity as areas of concern. Washington, D.C., additionally identified child welfare and juvenile justice. Washington, D.C., and New York included community support and opportunity, which in Washington, D.C., was identified as the need to have a safe and connected environment for girls and in New York as using a "whole child" approach to change policies for girls in poverty. These areas are consistent with the academic literature and provide an additional dimension to what we know about the needs and opportunities for both cis and trans girls of color across the country as understood by the groups and organizations that serve and advocate with them.

The Young Women's Freedom Center (YWFC) and Alliance for Girls each generate community literature that centers on participatory action research with a focus on gender identity and expression in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Young Women's Freedom Center hosts an intergenerational collective of cis and trans women working together to conduct participatory and decolonizing research on the lived experiences of cis and trans women and girls, as well as gender nonconforming people who have had system involvement.<sup>1</sup> In their research in San Francisco, YWFC elevates the role and impact of multiple entangled institutions over the life course of a person, resulting in the involvement of cis and trans women and girls, and gender nonconforming people, with the foster, juvenile justice, and adult justice systems (Melendrez & Young Women's Freedom Center, 2019). The entangled and interacting systems they explore include housing, family, foster care, school, the juvenile justice system, the adult justice system, the healthcare/mental health system, and the above- and underground economies.

Alliance for Girls carried out action research on the lived experiences of cis and trans girls of color in Oakland and San Francisco. Alliance for Girls' Lived Experiences of Girls report series explores the experiences of girls of color attending public schools and living in Oakland and San Francisco. In this work, the secondary data reveal racial and ethnic disparities in academic outcomes as well as in disciplinary measures, absenteeism, and graduation rates for Black and Latina girls. Qualitative data, collected through focus groups designed and led by women and girls of

<sup>1</sup> The Young Women's Freedom Center defines system as "any government entity, organization, or network that participates in criminalizing and controlling women and girls" (Melendrez & Young Women's Freedom Center, 2019).

color, shed some light on the stories behind the numbers. In Oakland and San Francisco, girls discussed the impact of overlooked and ignored sexual harassment at school and in the community, as well as a lack of caring adults at school who reflect their racial and ethnic backgrounds, on their safety and sense of belonging (Ohlson & Bedrossian, 2016; Ohlson, Bedrossian, & Ortega, 2016; Alliance for Girls, 2018). In Oakland, girls of all races discussed the targeted racism and sexism that uniquely impacts Black and African American girls at school and in the community. In San Francisco, girls identified institutional racism, teacher bias, and conflicting gender and race expectations of their academic performance, as well as self-efficacy, as the primary issues at school. In both Oakland and San Francisco, girls also shared the unique value of girl-serving organizations in providing safe and politicizing spaces for themselves.

Throughout the community literature there was also a common thread around power and resistance. In the YWFC report, participants discussed “the ingenuity, stamina, and forward plan” required to navigate systems (Melendrez & Young Women’s Freedom Center, p. 33). In the AFG research, participants discussed their own power for effecting systemic change and supporting their peers and families (Ohlson & Bedrossian, 2016; Ohlson, Bedrossian, & Ortega, 2016; Alliance for Girls, 2018). Girls also defined ways that schools and communities could improve, such as through teacher training, increasing staff diversity, implementing and holding accountability around sexual harassment, equitable enforcement of dress codes, and more counseling support. And, despite the challenges in their lives, girls believed that they could achieve their dreams.

### **This Report**

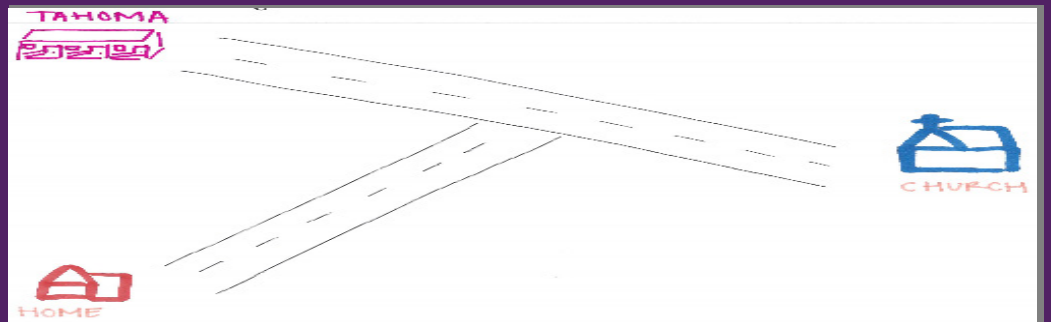
*Together, We Rise* builds on the academic and community research on the needs of girls of color. The report findings aim to understand the ways in which girls of color experience their communities in Oakland, San Francisco, and San Jose. The report lays out the intimate perspectives and viewpoints of girls, providing a depth of information that is aimed at elevating solutions to the problems outlined. In this way, the report adds dimension to the existing literature, exemplifying the intersectionality and transformational resistance experiences of girls of color.

### **RESOURCES**

To access and read publicly available community and academic local and national reports and fact sheets on the status of girls, including many of the reports referenced here, visit the Resource section of Alliance for Girls’ website:

<https://www.alliance4girls.org/resources/>.

The images on the right are drawings by girls who participated in the listening sessions. The girls were asked to draw their community.



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## METHODOLOGY

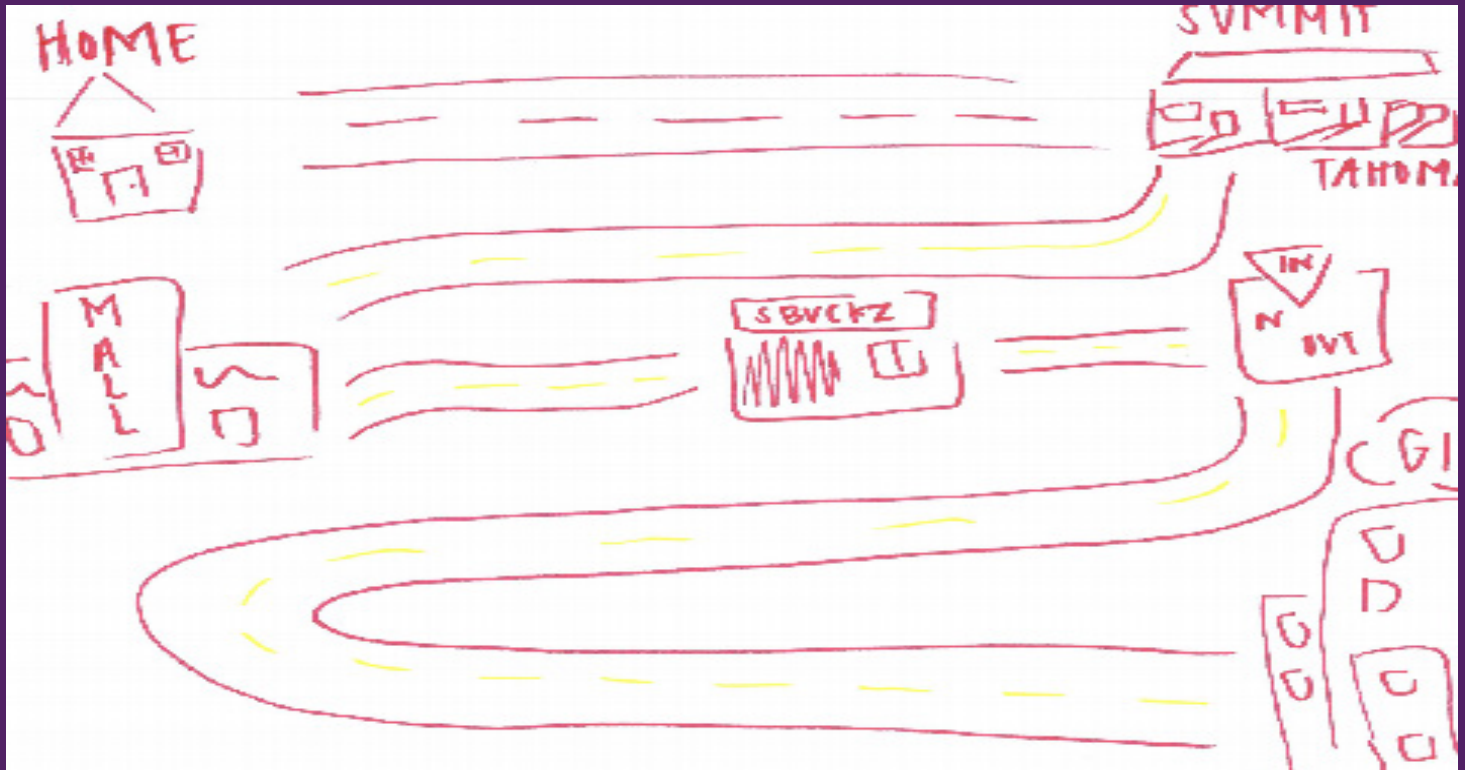
### YPAR FRAMEWORK

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The goal of *Together, We Rise* is to amplify and center girls' voices and experiences to create stronger support systems for girls as defined by girls. To advance this goal, Alliance for Girls implemented a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach. YPAR is "an innovative approach to positive youth and community development in which young people are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them" (YPAR Hub, 2015). It provides young people with the opportunity to study, assess, and determine actions on the factors impacting their lives, as well as to determine the actions to rectify problems (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

AFG utilizes YPAR for multiple important reasons. AFG has expertise in implementing YPAR based on its MGNI model. It is an approach that aligns with AFG's values of centering and elevating girls as experts in their own lives and the ones with the best responses to the problems they are facing, as well as working through an intergenerational approach. YPAR allows AFG to engage adult allies in sharing their skills and supporting young people in leading action-focused research.





Girls, who defined and identified themselves as research coordinators, were trained in the research process, designing and facilitating focus groups, coding and analyzing data, and developing recommendations for change. The coordinators designed the listening session format, a short survey to collect demographic and other relevant data, and an introductory exercise to collect additional information. The data collection tools aimed to collect information to facilitate better understanding of girls' lives as they related to a series of areas of inquiry. Rather than advancing this project through a series of core research questions, coordinators developed their data collection tools around areas of inquiry that they identified as important for advancing the goals of better understanding the experiences and needs of girls in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The coordinators were interested in structuring the listening sessions to facilitate understanding of barriers to girls' dreams and goals; girls' support systems; the practices and behaviors that embody support for girls; factors impacting girls' well-being and safety; and the solutions listening session participants believed could address the challenges they were experiencing (see Appendix A). The coordinators were also interested in ensuring that listening sessions were implemented and structured in a way that eliminated or diminished differential power between themselves and participants and felt like girls hanging out. They developed a customized Spotify playlist, games, and art activities in addition to a traditional series of open-ended, qualitative questions for the girls. The demographic data collected through the survey aimed at capturing girls' self-defined race, gender, sexual orientation, and at least one lifelong dream.

Seven listening sessions were held across the Bay Area. Three sessions were held in Oakland, two in San Francisco, and two in San Jose. A total of 63 girls participated. One of the San Jose sessions was held with only self-identified teen moms. Greater detail about the sampling and data analysis process is provided in Appendix B.

## YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH TEAM

For over a year, from January 2018 to February 2019, a group of 15-to-18-year-old girls led the design and execution of the *Together, We Rise* report. Gabrielle Battle, Maren Frye, Esme Kalbag, Sofia Orduña, Anna Sara Mehouelley, Sasha Mylan Ruby Williams, and Andrea Zamora learned about and engaged with the phases and components of the research process. What follows are their reflections on the experience.



**Name:** Gabrielle Battle

**Age:** 16

**Graduation Year:** 2019

**Hobbies:** debate, Centerforce Youth Court, mentoring youth, working with the Black Student Union

**Dreams:** To become a civil rights attorney and later a senator.

**Favorite thing about the Bay Area:** My favorite thing about the Bay Area is the diversity and love that the area has.

**Reflection on the Work:** I loved working with the Bay Area chapter of the Young Women's Initiative. I think that so often when research is conducted and policies are implemented, they are written by people in power who will not be impacted by the proposed policy. Since Alliance for Girls centered this report around the experiences of girls and let girls design the questions and run the listening sessions, we were able to infuse our stories and connect with other girls who shared our experiences. Though everyone has different lived experiences, as a girl of color there are some problems that are so present and pervasive that we all experience them, regardless of our circumstances. That said, while I shared many of the same experiences that girls discussed, I also learned [about] the struggles of others and became exposed to problems that I had not had to face before. After being a part of this project from the beginning, it was even more rewarding to start thinking about solutions that would meet our needs and the needs of other girls whose stories are not being told or thought about when creating policy and programming. I loved working on this project, bonding with my peers, and working under phenomenal mentors.

**Name:** Maren Frye

**Age:** 17

**Graduation Year:** 2019

**Hobbies:** Crew, reading, gardening

**Dreams:** To become a biomedical researcher or public policy maker.

**Favorite thing about the Bay Area:** The spirit of political activism.

**Reflection on the Work:** Being part of the Young Women's Leadership Board, and working on the YWI in particular, has been a transformative experience. Constantly surrounded by inspiring, hard-working, intelligent young women, I've gained [an] overwhelming sense of empowerment and pride in my identity. Through this experience, I've learned what it means to keep fighting for equality and how important it is that we lift up the voices of young women in our society.

**Name:** Esme Kalbag

**Age:** 16

**Graduation Year:** 2019

**Hobbies:** Mock Trial, volunteering with the FINDconnect program at the UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital, tennis, baking

**Dreams:** I hope to go to medical school and pursue a career through which I can combine my passions for social justice, biological sciences, and technology.

**Favorite thing about the Bay Area:** The food and people.

**Reflection on the Work:** Working on the Young Women's Initiative and as a part of the Alliance For Girls' Young Women's Leadership Board has allowed me to see firsthand the power and effectiveness of girls coming together to enact the change they believe is necessary. I am so grateful to Alliance for Girls for letting me see how much of an impact I can make, and that I am capable of much more than I am aware [of]. They entrusted me and my peers with so much responsibility, and that changed my perspective and gave me a great sense of empowerment. It's even more inspiring to know that what the girls in the listening sessions expressed will directly influence policies and programming so that they can effectively empower young women of color and help them achieve their dreams.

**Name:** Anna Sara Mehouelley

**Age:** 16

**Graduation Year:** 2019

**Hobbies:** Singing, dancing, and writing

**Dreams:** To become music business executive.

**Favorite thing about the Bay:** Lake Merritt

**Reflection on the Work:** *The young women I worked with on this project constantly encourage each other to not underestimate the power we each have to make a difference. I value the work we put in passionately to advocate for the girls in our communities. As a board member, I have represented my team through presentations on leadership and advocacy to girls at sister organizations. Our goal is to promote the creation of safe and supportive learning environments for girls in Bay Area school districts. By thoroughly identifying issues and presenting various solutions, we claim our power to influence decisions.*

**Name:** Sofia Orduña

**Age:** 15

**Graduation Year:** 2021

**Hobbies:** Swimming + water polo team, Centerforce Youth Court Advocacy

**Dreams:** To become an ambassador or do something with environmental and social justice.

**Favorite thing about the Bay:** The culture of activism, with people empowered to protest injustice.

**Reflection on the Work:** *I got to know the Alliance for Girls in middle school, when I interviewed a panel of women in different impressive fields who had all done a lot to shatter the glass ceiling for women in politics, advertising, and Fortune 500 companies. I am so glad to be able to join an organization that did so much for women and girls. As part of the Young Women's Initiative, I got to talk to girls around the Bay Area about their hopes for the future, what they liked about their world, and what was holding them back. It was a very powerful experience to see how many of the same issues linked us together and how the Bay Area still has a long way to go in full equity and helping everyone succeed. It's important to listen to girls because adults and authority can't decide solutions for them: girls know what they need to succeed, and while in the listening sessions I heard a lot of good solutions and ideas that girls wanted to implement to fix their problems. It was very empowering to share experiences with other teens. I think that's what's really important about the work we did, that it was led by teenage girls who were talking to other girls like them. Sharing personal experiences with peers was a very healing experience for everyone. In my life, I haven't always had a safe space to talk about how I was feeling. Seeing girls have that safe space to talk, connect, and empower each other reminded me of what made me passionate about continuing this work and supporting all young women to succeed.*

**Name:** Sasha Mylan Ruby Williams

**Age:** 17

**Graduation Year:** 2019

**Hobbies:** Performing arts, creating video games, advocating for young girls of color, watching movies, reading/writing, using my imagination

**Dreams:** To be a director/producer and CEO of my own company that tells different stories and perspectives about issues facing our country today.

**Favorite Thing About the Bay Area:** The diversity in cultures and opinions.

**Reflection on the Work:** *I believe that the power of Youth Participatory Action Research is being able to listen to different perspectives on similar issues affecting our community today. Being able to hear other girls' experiences and learning what they go through in their eyes is amazing, and I'm happy I now have the skills to conduct and gather research about their stories and can inform others girls' experiences.*

**Name:** Andrea Zamora

**Age:** 18

**Graduation Year:** University of California, Berkeley, class of 2022

**Hobbies:** Drawing, painting, knitting

**Dreams:** Working in medicine, giving back to my community

**Favorite Thing About the Bay Area:** The culture.

**Reflection on the Work:** *I have been involved with Alliance for Girls since I was a junior in high school, and what keeps bringing me back is how passionate my peers are about the work. It's an amazing feeling to know that you're doing something to improve your community. I will always love Alliance for Girls because they allow us, the young women, to have a safe space where we are viewed as mature women who can make our [own] decisions. We aren't told what to do; we structure the work because they allow us to and give us the freedom to. Our voice feels valued, and I'm extremely thankful for all the projects that I've been able to take part of. This project was really meaningful because we, the young women, were actually the ones facilitating the listening sessions and breaking down the information. They taught us how to be a young powerful researcher; we obtained a leadership role. Alliance for Girls has really impacted me in such a positive way and I'm so happy to see how it has impacted my peers as well. It's a beautiful community of powerful women that get to work together and change the world, a project at a time.*

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## FINDINGS: THE GIRLS

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### **A total of 63 girls shared their struggles, dreams, and recommendations for change at the seven listening sessions.**

A total of sixty-three girls shared their struggles, dreams, and recommendations for change at the seven listening sessions. A short survey was used to collect demographic information from the girls. Of the sixty-three girls who participated in the listening sessions, twenty-four (38%) were from Oakland, twenty-four (38%) from San Francisco, and fifteen (24%) from San Jose. With regards to age, eight (13%) were 10–12 years old, twenty-two (35%) were 13–16 years old, twenty-six (41%) were 17–19 years old, and seven (11%) of the participants did not respond to the question. Thirty-two (51%) identified as Hispanic or Latino, nine (14%) as Black or African American, six (10%) as Asian or Asian American, eight (13%) indicated multiple races, one person wrote in their response as Middle Eastern (2%), and seven (11%) did not respond to the question. Nearly all—fifty-six (89%)—identified as female, and seven (11%) participants did not respond to the question. When asked about sexual orientation, forty-five (71%) indicated they were straight, one gay, one lesbian, one queer, three (5%) indicated “do not know,” two (3%) wrote in “mostly straight,” one indicated bisexual, one indicated a refusal to answer, and eight (13%) did not respond to the question.

All of the girls we heard from had dreams and goals they planned to accomplish. Through the surveys and discussions, girls discussed their personal goals, as well as goals they had for their families and communities. Among the responses to the question about dreams, twenty-five (39%) responses indicated girls wanted a career, twelve (19%) wanted recognition and financial stability (usually to help support their family), seven (11%) wanted to attend college, seven (11%) wanted to be a role model or help and give back to the community, six (9%) wanted to travel and see the world, five (7%) wanted to be happy or be their best selves, and three (4%) wanted to be a mom.

The girls we heard from expressed a hyperawareness of themselves and the relationships they have with others, including both peers and adults. They shared an awareness of the spaces they occupied and how they experienced these spaces differently based on key aspects of their known or perceived identities. Girls generally recognized their self-identities, or their own potentials and qualities as individuals. They also described how their self-identities or those of their female peers could be impacted by external pressures, such as the pressure placed on their physical appearance and the pressure placed on them by peers, families, and schools. These pressures often create an unhealthy and inaccurate lens through which the girls view themselves, thereby impacting the girls’ mental and emotional well-being.

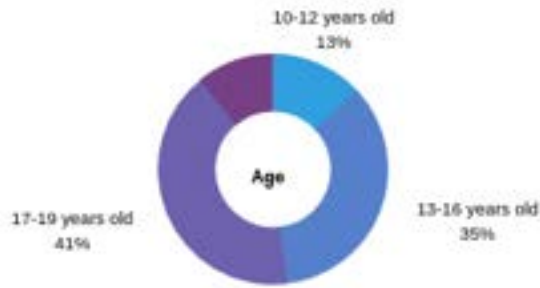
However, girls also described how believing in themselves was a way to resist the pressures they experience. Across their stories and experiences, girls described both how they actively challenged and changed things they did not like and how the support they asked for and need from stakeholders improved their day-to-day and long-term well-being. The themes that arose from girls’ stories are presented in the sections that follow. They are organized by the spheres of influence that girls said impacted their daily experiences and outcomes: social media, home life, school, public spaces, girl-serving organizations, and structural and systemic barriers. Each section concludes with recommendations for change identified by girls for that sphere of influence.

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*“We do have a lot of struggles with our race and being women, or specifically me as a Black woman. I am constantly told that I am not liked, but besides being told that I am not liked and I am not valued. . . there is a certain point where you start to believe what people are telling you, but there is a time after that where you start to value who you are, and you realize that you would not want to be anyone else. . . Our struggle brings us together as a community, and reassures us that we are valued and we are important. You could tell a lot of stories about being a girl of color in America.”*

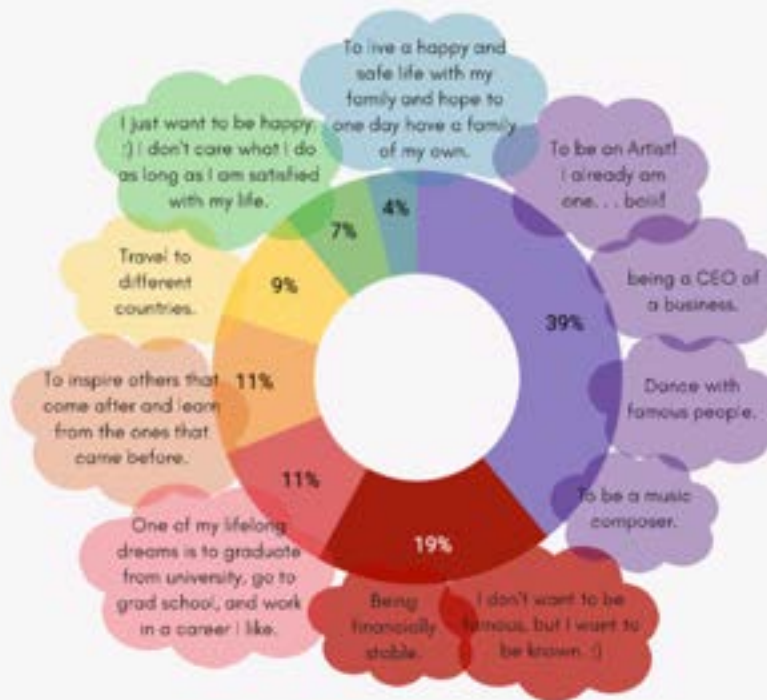
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*“People be thinking [that] because I am Mexican, I am less. . . I am not less. . . I know who I am. I know why my family came here. . . I know that I can do good and show people who I am. Just because I am a certain race, does not mean I am capable of less.”*



## Girls said they dream about:

- having a career. ● recognition and financial stability. ● attending college.
- being a role model or giving back to the community.
- traveling and seeing the world. ● being happy. ● being a mom.



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## FINDINGS: GIRLS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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**For the girls we heard from, social media exists as a world of its own. Girls are liking, commenting on and resharing photos, responding to, favoriting, and retweeting tweets. Social media is a system in and of itself, being impacted by and in return impacting not only girls and those who use it, but also the real world that girls live and operate in. Although girls did not identify ways to address the challenges that social media brings to their lives, one girl did note its potential for enhancing community support.**

### **The Impact of Social Media**

In almost every listening session, girls talked about how their actions and their self-esteem are influenced by what they see on social media. As one girl noted, *“Like the social media stuff, put it to the point that we have to be perfect. We have to have a big butt, small waist, all that stuff. It gets into our head and starts to mess with our confidence.”* Girls also talked about social media being a source of competition that pits girls against one another in a race to look like the pictures they see online. One girl summarized, *“Social media is training us to compare our lives. Girls use it to compare the way they look. It has to do with self-esteem. We want to look pretty, be pretty.”* This competition reinforces the status quo: while girls don’t necessarily agree with what’s popular online or feel that it matches their values, they feel pressured to share and post similar content in order to gain likes and followers, thereby creating a cycle of negative body images and self-perceptions. One girl, who identified as Black, spoke about how Black culture and Black women are particularly objectified in videos and images on social media. She shared how frustrating it is when part of their identity has historically been discriminated against or made fun of, and then is repackaged, popularized, and resold by the mainstream and social media:

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*“They take things we have been teased for our whole lives, and use that for their own benefit and do not want the actual person that comes with the big lips, the big hips, the big butt. They do not want the actual person, they want what they see. It becomes a trend. Things that women of color have been teased about their entire lives become a trend, and it is not ours anymore.”*

### **Recommendation**

In their recommendations for change, girls did not discuss how they could change social media for the better. One girl, however, pointed out how social media can be a positive tool for her community to disseminate information about existing resources. She said, *“People need help. People don’t know about the resources. Girls don’t know about . . . free daycare . . . Telling people about them . . . [through] Facebook.”* For this girl, Facebook is a tool for sharing information about resources in her community.



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## FINDINGS: GIRLS AND HOME LIFE

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**Girls described their homes as sources of solace and stress. Their experiences at home are shaped by different factors. These factors include their parents' or guardians' working conditions, whether their parents or guardians had a healthy and safe relationship, and the type of interactions their family members have with each other and them. When it came to ways of improving their family lives, girls had one request: that their male family members treat all women and girls with respect.**

### Parents' Working Conditions

A common theme that arose was girls not seeing parents because they work too much. This was especially true for girls from homes in which the household relied on one income. The girls with single mothers said that they knew their mothers were rarely home because they work multiple jobs. As one girl in San Francisco shared, *"My mom's work—she works a lot, a lot, and I never have time to be with her—but she needs to work because she wants to do everything for me—food, rent. She works so hard so I can have a good life."* Girls understood that the amount of time parents spent working was because of financial needs and demands, especially due to the high cost of living in the Bay Area. The girls who had single mothers also knew that their mothers' long work hours were a result of wage disparities that primarily impact undocumented, immigrant, and/or women of color; their moms had to work more to make enough money for the household since they were not being paid fairly. As one girl summarized the difference in pay, *"There is a wage gap for women of color. The difference between pay between women and men. Women get paid less than men, which makes it harder to pay rent here in San Francisco."*

### Stressful Family Interactions

Girls across the Bay Area identified their families as a source of stress when they are not interacting in a healthy and supportive manner. This occurred when parents were not getting along with each other, when families reinforced harmful and limiting expectations on them based on gender stereotypes, and when families withdrew support if girls had a baby at an early age. When parents are fighting or arguing, girls shared that it impacted their well-being, including their mental health and performance. One girl in San Francisco shared that *"arguments between [my] mom and stepdad and how he drinks"* stressed her out. Similarly, in Oakland a girl shared the impact of arguments between her parents on her mental health and her school performance: *"My parents argue a lot and it lasts a long time. They say things [they] can't mean, but do mean, and they don't know it hurts our feelings and affects me in school."*

Girls identified gendered roles and stereotypes at home as a source of toxicity. Girls felt the pressure to uphold expectations that their male family members did not have to uphold. Girls shared that while they were responsible for childcare and household chores as well as their schoolwork, boys were not expected to care for the home. One girl described the extent of her responsibilities at home: *"I have to constantly check on them [siblings]. My mom works on the weekend and I have to watch my sister to make sure she is safe, and it's hard."* Girls also felt the pressure to be

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*"My mom works on the weekend and I have to watch my sister to make sure she is safe and it's hard since she's little and she does stuff like jump on couches. My grandma can't drive and that stresses me."*

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*"The only thing that stresses me out is thinking about my future. I don't want to be like women that work all day and not be with their kids. I am trying to have an 8 am-3 pm where I can take [him] to school and get him after sports. For me, I thought it was only in the movies. But it's real. . . people do live like that, just not here. . . This is not it. . . I never want him to feel hunger or anything like that, ever."*

attractive and withhold from dating and doing schoolwork, but noted that their male family members were not. As a girl in a San Francisco listening session noted, *"When I go to family parties, they ask the boys if they have girlfriends. For me, they say I should not have a boyfriend. They ask boys if she [their girlfriend] is pretty."* Girls also discussed the stereotypes their families reinforced regarding their appearance and academic performance. Two girls in a San Jose listening session discussed this. One girl shared that, when she was doing schoolwork, her uncle would ask, *"Why is she doing homework when she should cook?"* Another girl said her father similarly asked, *"Why is she doing homework when she should be doing makeup?"*

Young mothers spoke about the intergenerational impact of toxic gender roles and the withdrawal of family support once they became pregnant. One young woman shared, *"A lot of family, they think that a girl gets pregnant you have to go to the guy's house. You go to his house. You have to pay for him [the baby]. You are out. That is what my mom did. I don't even talk to her . . . My mom sees it like that. If you have a kid you are gone, you are not a kid no more."* One young mother described the withdrawal of family support impacting her well-being and the well-being of her child: *"I don't get a lot of support from my family . . . I get mistreated by relatives . . . I have no one to talk to about my child."* Another young woman shared that she saw the impact of the withdrawal differently: *"I kind of like it. You learn about yourself and push yourself harder . . . If I had support, I would be more comfortable. I have my baby's dad's support, which is helpful. It would be way harder if I did not. I like that my parents don't help me. It teaches me more about myself."* Although the young mothers we heard from viewed the withdrawal of family support differently, they agreed that having support from someone—a partner or family member—was important. They also agreed that they wanted the best for themselves and their children. As one young mother shared, *"I don't want to be like women that work all day and not be with their kids . . . I never want him to feel hunger or anything like that, ever."*

### Supportive Family Interactions

The majority of girls across the Bay Area identified their families as a source of support. Girls commonly described that their mothers provided advice and, when dealing with challenges at school, served as their advocates. A girl in Oakland described how she felt supported by her mother when she was having issues with a teacher: *"I had an art teacher. One time, after school, the teacher told me to get in here. Be quiet. Don't talk back. I wasn't in the program. I did not do anything. My mom picked me up and got the principal involved and went to my counselor. Next year, I did not see her [the art teacher] again. She [the art teacher] had similar incidents with others [students]."* Girls also shared that their families showed them love and support by working to bring in money for the family and by caring for them in ways such as cooking their favorite meals: *"Last year when there was test days, my mom made what I liked to eat . . . she told me you're going to do fine. She is really supportive."*

Girls also shared that male family members, including fathers, brothers, and/or close male friends who girls considered family, were particularly protective and defensive of them if they witnessed someone harassing them in public. Girls agreed that while they could acknowledge and understand their male family members and their well-intentioned and protective instincts, they feared or saw that these actions could result in further violence between their male family members and the harassers. As a girl in San Francisco shared, *"When it [harassment] happens to me, [male family and friends say,] 'Who was it? Let me beat his ass.' [I tell them] you are not going to do anything because it will make the situation worse."*

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*"Why is she doing homework when she should be doing makeup?"*

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*"I definitely talk to my mother because she has experienced these things, just in a different time period."*

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*"Dudes like that . . . wouldn't want that to happen to their daughter, sister, and we are someone's daughter."*



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### Recommendations

Although girls' lives at home are complex, there was only one recommendation for change that they believed could improve their well-being and the well-being of other girls and women.

Girls said that they want their male family members to understand that the best way to support them is to treat all women and girls with respect and care; girls want them to not perpetuate or participate in the objectification and harassment of women and girls.

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*“Their mentality [male family and friends] is different . . . It is way less care for someone they don't know. I talk to my guy friends and cousins, but they change their perspective.”*



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## FINDINGS: GIRLS AND SCHOOL

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**Girls said their schools are under-resourced and lacking the courses they need. Girls also said they experience discrimination and harassment from educators and peers at school based on their gender, race/ethnicity, and religion. Yet within this space, girls were able to resist and organize to make their schools a more bearable space. They also identified the resources and opportunities they believe would make schools more welcoming and inclusive for them.**

### **Schools Are Under-Resourced and Lacking Important Courses**

Girls shared that their schools lack resources. In Oakland, a girl talked about the lack of stability in her classroom because of the firing of teachers and the impact it had on entering college. She shared, *"I didn't have math in school for three years because the charter school was firing a lot of teachers. It was hard to get into college. My high school did not have resources for what I needed to do well in college. . . . They didn't prepare me well for [the] ACT."* In San Jose, girls talked about the impact of important courses like human sexuality being cut. One girl vocalized the value of this course: *"Human sexuality . . . talked about pregnancy and different types of birth control. It was not like sex ed. It was different, deeper. It was racial, your sexuality, all the different types of sexuality. . . . The freshmen that don't get it now are not going to know about more than one type of birth control and pressure to have sex."* Across the listening sessions, girls agreed that sex education was important for planning pregnancies, addressing questions about consent, and managing pressures to have sex.

In San Jose and San Francisco, girls shared the need for mental health services at school. As a girl in San Jose stated, *"At my school we did not have programs or a counselor and teachers. A lot of kids did not have the help they need. Some are suffering and are behind in the long-term."* Girls also shared that schools were not spaces designed for them to succeed in because schools do not provide the courses and life skills they felt they needed to be successful. As a girl from San Francisco shared: *"School does not prepare you for college. You take unnecessary [courses] that [do] not go with the major you pick. They don't teach you about the real world, like taxes and what to do with them. They teach you unnecessary things."* Because of the lack of resources and courses with the information girls need, girls found it challenging to see school as a space designed for them to succeed in.

### **Gender and Race Discrimination at School**

Girls observed gender discrimination at school through the ways adults disciplined girls differently from boys. A Latina girl in San Francisco described an incident in which a boy and a girl exhibited the same behavior but experienced different consequences: *"In class one time, a boy was being really bad and having a fight with another boy and the teacher just gave him a reflection . . . when a girl got mad, she had to go to the office."* A Black girl in Oakland described directly having the experience of a teacher treating her differently from a boy: *"There was a white boy in my grade and he was talking about police brutality . . . he said even though I was light skinned, I would get shot by the police. I got in trouble because the school thinks I'm dangerous because I expressed how I felt about that. I've gotten suspended five times for nothing. The boy was just told that he can't say things like that and nothing happened to him. The teacher told me not to make it a race thing and asked me to leave."*

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*"If the school cannot provide funds for those teachers, then the students suffer. We don't have those resources because they [teachers] are not provided with them."*

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*"[Sex education] is not mentioned in schools . . . and that is why teenagers are getting pregnant."*

One of the more prominent ways in which discipline promoted race and gender discrimination was through schools' enforcement of dress code policies. Girls shared that girls, not boys, are commonly the ones who get in trouble for dress code violations. They also shared that among girls, girls of color are disproportionately getting in trouble for dress code violations as compared to their white counterparts. As one Latina girl in San Jose shared, "[I]f some white girl [is] wearing underwear to school . . . [and] maybe [a] Latina [is] wearing the same thing . . . who is going to get dress coded? The Latina girl. The admin [school administrator] drives by, we have golf carts at our school . . . and tells them [the Latina girl] to go to the office. The other girl [the white girl] is standing there wearing the same thing. You see it [race discrimination] is being normalized because the administration did not do anything [to the white girl]." The same girl shared, "If it [biased dress code enforcement] keeps happening around your school, it also causes truancy."

Black girls in Oakland shared similar experiences to Latina girls in San Jose when it came to the consequences of dress code enforcement: "In my school if you're Black and a girl, you get disrespected. If you have dress code violations, you're sent home and almost suspended." Across the Bay Area, girls described dress code infractions as disproportionately targeting girls of color. Girls also described the way dress code infractions impact girls' school attendance, whether they are missing class time because they are in the office, receiving a suspension, or because girls prefer to skip school rather than be penalized for being girls of color, attending school, and wearing clothes.

### Harassment and Bullying at School

Girls noted that they felt unsafe at school because of harassment from their peers. All girls described being bullied because of their appearance. The bullying they experienced, however, varied by their religion, parenting status, and race or ethnicity. A Muslim girl described being bullied at school because of her religious background: "Like the jokes at my school . . . 'Do you have a bomb in your backpack?' 'Oh you're a terrorist,' 'Why are you not wearing a hijab?' . . . you know, I do not take it personal. I laugh it out because it is what it is." Latina girls talked about peers assuming they were immigrants and or undocumented and being harassed for that.

Girls shared that their male peers commonly disrespected and objectified them. Many girls agreed, and one shared that it seemed as though "when boys see a girl, they see her for her body." From the girls' experiences, it was clear that they felt disrespected and objectified by their male peers. The jokes boys made also were toxic and reinforced sexist ideas: "This boy asked if I wanted to hear a joke and then he said, 'Women's rights.' . . . I didn't know what to say."

Black girls in particular said that their Black male peers were sources of stress. More than any other group in the listening sessions, Black girls talked about male peers referring to them as "sluts" and "hoes." The girls felt as though people who should be supporting them were constantly tearing them down. As one girl from Oakland shared, "The Black boys bash us all the time. Your mother, sister, are Black, and it's stupid that they do this to us." In listening sessions across San Francisco and Oakland, Black girls shared that while Black women stand up for Black men and boys, it is not reciprocated: "When we do see Black men, they need to learn to advocate for Black men and women, because Black women advocate for Black men and women."

Girls shared that peer harassment was often perpetuated by educators, making girls feel disempowered and forced to address the issues themselves. Girls shared that when they reported harassment and assault, educators did nothing in response. This lack of adult educator response often resulted in girls having to manage the issues alone. As one girl in Oakland shared, "I got bullied in the 6th grade. I was in humanities and this boy was kicking me from back I grabbed his foot and threw him, and his friends started hitting me. He grabbed my computer and put it in a backpack

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*"You will be wearing the simplest things . . . I wore a [San Jose] Sharks beanie and someone else did too . . . [Only] I got dress coded. I was in the office all day because I was 'a distraction.' . . . I am just trying to go to my classes."*

and started jumping on it. The computer broke. The teacher saw everything and didn't do anything. [I] felt like I wasn't worth anything. The teacher could have told them to stop and taken me to [the] office so they would stop. He did nothing." As the girl's story shows, the lack of response from school educators often resulted in feelings of disempowerment and the perpetuation of violence at school from girls and boys. For Black girls in particular, they more commonly described having to deal with educators who blatantly and unapologetically used the N-word. As one girl shared, "I have had a teacher mansplain to me why he could use the N-word when reading in class." Moreover, Black girls more often than any other group of girls described having to directly manage or confront adult educators for their behaviors:

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*"The principal tried to justify the use of the N-word, but I was like, 'Why would you put it in the curriculum when you know that you are teaching this curriculum to white students?' . . . I did not get an answer . . . he said that there was a trigger warning, but . . . they did not put a trigger warning. I wasn't mad. I definitely did not feel support, but I was not surprised because I have faced things like teachers yelling and screaming in my face since freshman year . . . [and] knowing that I am getting graded harder than the white students are. They do drugs, they smoke, they do EVERYTHING [laughs and snaps] and they are getting straight As because they have money . . . I'm dying over here, meeting with my teachers, missing my lunch, missing my free time, and be meeting with them and barely get a B."*

Among young mothers, the fact that they had children at a young age was a reason that educators and fellow students harassed them. A young woman from San Jose who had a child while she was in high school described a situation in which she felt pressured and intimidated by a teacher because she had a child at an early age: "As soon as my teacher found out [I had a baby], they told me, if you write a piece about how the baby helped you, that she would pass me. I felt pressured to do it. So I wrote and read it [to the class]. After that, people that said 'hi' would not say 'hi' to me. I was the girl with the baby. I was the mom." The girl felt pressure from the teacher to disclose her status as a mother in front of her peers. This resulted in her peers socially excluding and bullying her. It also led her to leave her school.

### Peer Pressure and Support at School

Girls also discussed feeling compelled to behave in certain ways, such as partying and hooking up. The pressure to behave this way came from both girls and boys. At times, the girls described the need for younger girls to try to act as if they were older by dressing in certain ways and wearing makeup. Latina girls more commonly described that fighting over boys and getting into trouble was seen by peers as cool. The pressure from peers also embodied itself as competition, particularly between girls. Yet girls expressed wanting to support each other, not put each other down: "Girls are competing against each other instead of building each other up. It is hard to get out of that mindset. Everyone should be your friend, or friendly at least."

Although girls described feeling pressure to compete with other girls, they also described girls, especially their friends, as a source of support. Many girls in each listening session discussed how they turned to their girlfriends in times of need, whether it was during finals week or while feeling unsafe in public spaces. As one girl shared, "I feel supported with friends. They don't judge you, because they can relate . . . they support you."

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*"There are also girls that put other girls down. Guys are oppressing us . . . girls are oppressing each other. We should unite and stop comparing ourselves."*

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*"To fit in you let guys do something to you . . . smoke, drink, sexual stuff—touch in places you don't want to be touched. Guys don't have permission, but they do it anyway, so they fit in with their group. [There's] pressure to be sexually active for guys and girls."*

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*"I feel supported with friends. They don't judge you, because they can relate . . . they support you."*

### Seeking and Creating Support Systems at School

Although school is a space that can be unwelcoming for girls, many girls described intentionally finding and creating supportive relationships and spaces for themselves and their peers at school. Girls talked about creating peer support groups. Girls commonly described these groups as an important coping and survival strategy in order to feel supported at school, a space that commonly made girls feel unsafe and unwelcome. As one girl shared: *"I am in this . . . girls of color group at my school that I run. I feel supported by the people who go there. They are all in high school . . . and they are going through the same things that I do . . . knowing that we can make happiness out of things that are not necessarily good, and that we have each other. Every time I go to that club, I feel very supported by those people."* The girls described this work as important not only for their well-being but for the well-being of their peers. As one girl shared, "I work with a lot of student inclusion groups at my school . . . I like to look out for other student[s] of color."

### Recommendations

Girls want stronger, better resourced, and more supportive schools. Girls discussed making sure that schools had the funding they needed to pay teachers more and to have more teachers that hear and support them. They want spaces where girls can come together and speak about the issues they face. They want schools to provide free feminine hygiene products, scholarships, and courses that provide important life skills, such as financial management and human sexuality.

Girls also asked for more counselors and increased access to mental health services at school. As one girl stated, *"School should provide a therapist or someone you can talk to."* Girls identified schools as an important touch point for accessing mental health support. While girls acknowledged that the cost of mental health services as well as stigma could impact the willingness of guardians and girls to consent to go to counseling, girls strongly agreed that access to mental health support is important to them and their peers.



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*"There should be organizations that focus more on mental health, especially for middle and high school students. I feel like everyone has issues going on. Everyone has something going on and don't want to talk about it. They want resources. It should be there. It should be free. Not for \$200 a session."*



## FINDINGS: GIRLS AND PUBLIC SPACES

Girls in each city expressed feeling unsafe on public transportation and while walking through their communities. They described experiencing harassment and stalking, and having this impact how they think about and navigate public spaces. To address the issues impacting their safety, girls asked for people to stop using derogatory language toward girls and for bystanders to intervene if they witness harassment. In San Jose, girls asked for community events to bring people and resources together.

### Feeling Unsafe on Public Streets and Transportation

Girls in each city expressed feeling unsafe on public transportation and walking through their communities. At every listening session, nearly all the girls talked about everyday instances of being physically or verbally harassed as they took the bus to and from school or traveled by BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) to meet up with friends. In Oakland, girls spoke of being verbally and sexually harassed while walking downtown. They spoke about being called “bitch” and “slut” by men on the street. In one San Francisco listening session, two girls shared a similar experience of men following them. As one girl detailed:

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*“That happened to me once. I made the mistake of sitting in the back [of the BART train]. This grown, buff man sat behind me. I got off on San Bruno. He gets off too. I started walking. I see he was following me. I stopped. He stopped. I called my best friend. She told me she was not home, but her sister was. I walked into my best friend’s house. He followed me. I had to shut the door on him . . . I ran so fast that day. It was in the dark, too.”*

Girls shared that because of these daily occurrences of harassment, they always have to think about their safety. As one girl in San Francisco shared, *“I feel like . . . you have to learn to be conscious of where you are. When you are on the bus. You have to think about where you sit . . . next to the door, not next to someone who will hurt me . . . Girls, especially young girls, have to worry about where they are going to walk. I see that man over there, I am going to cross the other side of the street.”*

### Perpetrators and Bystanders

Several of the girls identified the individuals who followed or catcalled them as older adult men. A few also spoke to the fact that the men are sometimes intoxicated. They spoke about having to go “above and beyond” to not be harassed by men when they are trying to get to school or home. And that often there are people around who see what is going on but do nothing to help them or address the men: *“We cannot do anything to avoid it. There are so many people around. It happens on the bus. They hear you and know, but they don’t step in.”*

In San Jose, girls spoke about being harassed by people without homes. They described feeling uncomfortable and unsafe seeing used condoms and old drug needles. They also spoke of feeling unsafe because of the presence of gangs and shootings in their neighborhoods. As one girl shared: *“The other night, I got home from work. It was 11 p.m. I was walking to my house. I saw four guys in a car roll up to the laundromat. One was following the other one, throwing knives at him. It always happens. Guys in cars. The main thing that happens here . . . the gang bangers.”*

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*“Come to downtown [Oakland] and I don’t walk around here by myself. We walk down and old guys try and sell us weed. I feel so uncomfortable. I bring a jacket. One guy touched me when I was wearing a dress. Some guy just rubbed my thigh. They ask me if I’m legal yet and I say, ‘I’m a case.’ They say, ‘As long as your parents don’t know.’ My friend has junk in her trunk, and one guy spanked her butt.”*



### Recommendations

Across the Bay Area, girls said that they need public spaces—their neighborhoods, parks, trains—to be safe and cognizant of women’s and girls’ needs. They want people to stop calling them “bitches” and “hoes.” They want bystanders who witness girls being harassed to intervene and support them. They want to feel as if they can move around their communities without being physically and verbally harassed.

Girls in San Jose also brought up the need for events and gatherings where neighbors can come together to share resources and build relationships. They echoed each other’s thoughts, united in their belief that such events would be essential not only in supporting those in need, but also in connecting the community as a whole.

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*“Hoe’ and ‘bitch’ . . . get misused a lot . . . [People should] stop using it.”*

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*“I would like an event where you get to know your neighbors, the people around you. Get to know people that live in the same area as you. Get to know what they need, what is working for them, and [be] an outreach program at the same time. Like girls who don’t know about 4c’s[Community Child Care Council], I could help you there. I would go if it was for the neighbors or this zip code. Resources and what is happening in the neighborhood.”*



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## FINDINGS: GIRLS AND GIRL-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS

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**In the midst of challenges, girls noted areas where they felt supported: girl-serving organizations. Across the listening sessions, girls spoke about the staff and resources available that have helped them to navigate school or access resources like transportation passes and birth control. They also described the role staff in these spaces played as sources of comfort on bad days.**

One girl described the staff and participants of an all-girl organization as family: *“All them in the program are like family. I can call when going through things. They helped me with financial issues.”* In San Jose, Latina young mothers specifically described their case workers through a program for teen moms as great resources. As one participant shared, *“My case worker comes wherever I tell her to, which is really convenient. I usually tell her school or home. I don’t have privacy at home. So I prefer her to come to school. She also helps when I feel sad. I am not the person to tell what I am feeling. I am not a crybaby. But sometimes I have to vent. There are days when you have to. She kind of heard it all. She helps me. I can be a negative person. She helps me see things more positive.”*

### Recommendations

Girl-serving organizations are seen as a source of strength and resources for Bay Area girls. Girls want to see more spaces and organizations where girls can come together. They also want to have more role models in these spaces.

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*“Programs like this where girls come together and talk about their experiences and be together. Not a lot of girls have the opportunity to do this stuff. We had girl club, a class specifically for girls about girl issues, we get together to do yoga . . . and talk to each other. Girls in our community don’t have access or can’t find things like that. It [would] be cool to have that, and outreach to those girls.”*

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*“More women of color groups [snaps and agreement]. More building up of one another [instead of coming] . . . into competition with each other.”*







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## FINDINGS: GIRLS AND STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

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There were many systemic and structural issues that surfaced for girls in the listening sessions, including poverty, housing, immigration, racism, and sexism. Most girls understood that they live at the intersection of these complex issues. For girls, the systemic and structural issues were especially poignant when discussing what they would like to see changed in society.

### Poverty

Girls discussed coming from families with little money. Poverty was identified as a barrier to spending time with loved ones, as well as the reason for crime and under-resourced and underserved schools and communities. When asked about barriers to dreams, one girl in San Jose summarized: "Poverty. [All the girls at the listening session say 'Yes.'] *There is not enough money. That is why they are robbing houses at Willow Glen, a nicer area in San Jose. When you go to white schools, their mom is home or works and [they] have breakfast together. That is not realistic here. You don't see your mom sometimes because your mom is always working. I feel like that is what this community needs. More resources, money, counseling.*"

### Housing

In several of the listening sessions, housing was of critical concern. The cost of housing in the Bay Area was seen as too expensive. Girls worried about their families being evicted and not able to find housing. In San Francisco, girls spoke about rising rent and the fear of displacement by white people in the Mission. In San Jose, a single mom mentioned paying \$900 for rent, the entirety of one of her bi-weekly paychecks. Some girls live in small housing situations with many people and do not have spaces of their own.

### State Violence

Girls talked about the presence of immigration and law enforcement in their communities as a source of violence. Girls described law enforcement as a threat. Some girls spoke about their concern over the violence perpetrated by police in their neighborhoods. For Latina girls, state violence took the shape of immigration policies. They were especially concerned about the presence of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in their communities, and about the Trump administration. They noted that worrying about immigration issues was a significant stressor.

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*If I could go to school, I totally would, but I need to work. No one is going to give me money for my rent, my food, my kid. If things were cheap, you could do part time. However, you need to work full time and overtime. If you have to spend time working, [you] can't go to school. I want to go to school. If I want to survive this summer, I need to work."*

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*"For me, I want to move out of here. It is expensive, especially for . . . women of color."*

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*"I moved and we are trying to find a house and there are eight of us. It's a lot to take in. I don't get a lot of privacy. Sometimes I don't need all that noise. I like going here [girl-serving organization]. I like having fresh air."*

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*"ICE coming into the Bay Area, California; going into different places in California. Knowing that they should not be deporting people. Knowing that it is a sanctuary state, and I know that it affects me and my community because we are Hispanic . . . I am always listening to the things my parents are talking about at family reunions. I know they were close to my house [once] and we could not leave because there were trucks going around. They put us into a situation where we are afraid, but not afraid to go down with a fight to get away from that situation."*

### Sexism and Racism

Throughout girls' day-to-day experiences, they described sexism and racism as issues that manifested throughout each of the systems. They talked about facing sexism and racism in their personal lives, in their schools, and in public spaces. There was collective acknowledgment that sexism and racism exist as a systematic problem, not as isolated incidents.

### Recommendations

Life in the Bay Area is complicated for girls of color. They must deal with economic struggles, the rising cost of housing, and the threat and perpetration of state violence. Girls spoke to wanting to overcome the barriers and expressed a desire to improve these conditions. They want an end to patriarchy. They want less violence, cleaner streets, more affordable housing, and help for undocumented people. To make these changes, girls want women of color in positions of power. Girls also want respect. They want to not be underestimated. They want their opinions to be heard. They want to not be judged for how they look. As one girl from Oakland said, there is a need for *"more respect and opportunities for girls. Girls can't stand up a lot of times . . . but don't underestimate [us], because we can do a lot."*

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*"There is a wage gap for women of color. The difference between pay between women and men. Women get paid less than men, which makes it harder to pay rent here in San Francisco."*

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*"End patriarchy. Women and men should be equal. Treated equal. Everything should be equal."*

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*"We need more women and women of color in charge."*





Not Your  
Token Hijabi

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## CONCLUSION

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### **Girls in the Bay Area are smart, insightful, committed, and driving change that will alter their lives and the lives of their communities.**

They are living and operating in a region and time where, disproportionately, people of color are being forced to leave their homes and their communities as the division between the wealthy and the poor is rapidly increasing. Within this context, girls spoke to living in unsafe neighborhoods, being scared to take public transportation, having challenges at home, and attending under-resourced and racially- and gender-biased schools. Girls also spoke of the desire to attend college and expressed optimistic hopes and dreams for the future. They want to attain a higher education, have careers, travel, and support their families. At the same time, they are acutely aware of the structural and societal barriers they face in attaining their dreams because of their race, gender, immigration status, and income. The recommendations in this report come from the girls themselves. In addition to barriers, they also identified solutions that are connected to and will begin to eliminate the barriers they face.

Because Alliance for Girls believes in the impact of coordinated and collaborative community response that is informed and led by girls, we took what we learned from the listening sessions back to the community. Alliance for Girls and the Women's Foundation of California hosted five meetings across San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose in order to share both overall and city-specific findings. In total, 256 participants had the opportunity to participate in a facilitated discussion that solicited suggestions and feedback on the research and analysis, as well as on how to translate the research into action. Additionally, Alliance for Girls engaged subject-matter experts in order to further develop recommendations for change. All of this information is distilled in the Blueprint for Action. It is time we act to ensure girls' dreams become realities. Together, we have the responsibility to create a Bay Area where young women and girls are thriving and rising.





## Bay Area Young Women’s Initiative Blueprint for Action

The Blueprint for Action is a product of girl and community input. In total, 256 participants had the opportunity to translate the findings from the *Together, We Rise* report into recommendations that stakeholders can own and advance in order to ensure that girls across the Bay Area are thriving.

**INDIVIDUALS** can engage as powerful advocates for the girls in our community by:

- **Listening to girls and elevating their power and leadership intentionally and proactively.** For example, instead of assuming what girls need, ask them directly about their experiences, needs, and recommendations for change, and work with them to advance these recommendations.
- **Fighting harassment and violence toward girls in your day-to-day life.** For example, increase your awareness of the causes and consequences of violence and learn how to be an upstander if you witness verbal or physical harassment.
- **Serving as civic leaders.** You can register to vote, vote, complete and submit the U.S. Census, as well as call and write elected representatives to advocate for girls’ needs. If you are unable to vote or do not feel safe completing the U.S. Census, you can ask family and friends to vote or complete the census.
- **Acting as allies.** You can educate yourself on the challenges and issues surrounding girls and young women. You can also treat girls and women with respect and hold peers—especially straight, cisgender male peers—accountable for doing the same.

**SCHOOLS** can ensure that girls feel safe, supported, engaged, and well-equipped to graduate high school and achieve their goals by:

- **Implementing programming and resources dedicated to meeting girls’ needs.** For example, schools can provide mental health counseling, human sexuality and sex education courses, ethnic and gender studies courses, peer support groups, safe spaces for girls, and free feminine hygiene products.
- **Including girls in policymaking, budgeting, and creating solutions to existing issues.** For example, in the Bay Area, the Meeting Girls’ Needs Initiative, a system-change model spearheaded by AFG in partnership with its members, girls, families, and school and community stakeholders, engages girls as leaders of change in their communities. At the national level, the National Collaborative of Young Women’s Initiatives works to engage young women to address the core structural issues that keep low-income young women—particularly young women of color—from reaching their full potential. Consistently, girls ask for policies that prevent and address sexual harassment, as well as eliminate school dress codes and the presence of police in schools.
- **Conducting bias and diversity workshops and trainings for administration and staff, teachers, and male-identified peers.** For example, members of school communities can actively work to understand how practices and policies, such as dress codes, disproportionately impact girls of color.
- **Increasing connection and engagement with parents and guardians.** For example, schools can conduct workshops that build on the resources and skills of parents and guardians.
- **Fostering stronger partnerships with the surrounding communities to provide wraparound support for girls and their families.** For example, community organizations, universities, community colleges, and libraries can be partners with schools in order to provide more comprehensive, long-term services.
- **Creating pipelines and supports to hire teachers, administrators, counselors, and district leaders who reflect girls’ diverse identities and backgrounds.** Districts and schools can work with community members and community-based organizations to increase the representation and hiring of Black, Latinx, Native American, and Pacific Islander teachers and staff members.



**COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS** can elevate the voices of girls in a constant effort to meet their expressed needs and strengthen available supports by

- **Involving girls in decision-making.** For example, establish junior boards to provide leadership and mentorship opportunities for girls and hear directly from them in order to ensure programming is meeting their needs.
- **Creating cohesive networks of support by establishing strong partnerships between community organizations.** This linkage can provide girls access to more “one-stop shops.”
- **Conducting more targeted outreach to ensure broader awareness of existing supports.** Sometimes resources are available but underutilized. A targeted approach leveraging social media and current and past program or service participants is important.
- **Enhancing the engagement of families in programming and services.** For example, enhance existing services to engage families in supporting girls by providing services in the evenings and weekends, providing information about existing research on girls’ needs, or sharing community resources and opportunities.
- **Better compensating direct-service staff with a living wage and growth opportunities for the vital work they do to support girls.** This can include advocating with funders about the impact in communities when staff, particularly staff from the communities they are serving, have a living wage and the opportunity to serve as leaders within the organization.
- **Organizing and advocating collectively with girls and their families to put pressure on elected officials to meet the specific needs of girls.** Community-based organizations are uniquely positioned to mobilize girls and their parents or guardians to enact change and fight the structural issues impacting girls. Working together, organizations, girls, families, and communities have a stronger voice and can create a bigger impact.



**GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND POLICYMAKERS** can enact policies centered around girls’ needs and create foundations for equitable systems in which girls thrive by

- **Bringing girls’ voices into policymaking.** Create young women’s boards and hear directly from girls about their needs and proposed solutions, and work with girls to enact and enforce policies.
- **Hiring women of color for leadership positions.** Girls will benefit from seeing leaders who look like them.
- **Providing more funding for public schools, community-based organizations, and communities.** Government funding should be earmarked for mental health resources, feminine hygiene products, and developing and hiring skilled and diverse staff members.
- **Funding research regarding girls’ needs and the challenges they face.** The more data we have that tell the stories of the lived experiences of girls, the better we can advocate for change.
- **Enhancing safety for girls on public transportation.** For example, city governments can partner with girl leaders and public transportation agencies to develop creative solutions to address safety for girls in public spaces.
- **Enacting and implementing policies that are led by and respond to girls’ needs.** Examples include policies that enhance housing affordability in the San Francisco Bay Area, living wages for girls’ families or guardians, and policies and practices that protect girls and their families or guardians from unsafe law enforcement and federal immigration practices.



**FUNDERS** can enrich the lives of girls by listening to what they say they need and aligning resources and supports accordingly. This includes

- **Investing in girls' ideas and needs.** To do this, funders can use youth participatory funding and hear directly from girls about what they need and want to support.
- **Investing in public schools.** Funders can coordinate and collaborate with other foundations to provide targeted resources or support for districts and schools, especially in times of budgetary crisis, to ensure that the needs of girls are not overlooked.
- **Funding groups leading girl-centered, community-based organizing and advocacy work, in addition to girl programming and services.** Organizing and advocacy are impactful and powerful tools to address structural and systemic issues. Funders can support change by funding system-change work and girl-specific services to support girls and their families.
- **Foundations establishing innovative partnerships with the private sector (e.g., tech companies) and community partners.** These partnerships can aim to engage girl leaders and give back to and support girls' communities.
- **Funding organizations led by women who reflect the communities their organizations are serving.** In doing so, funders can support the elevation and growth of community leadership.
- **Supporting the arts.** Funders can support programming, such as media and film production, that allow girls to express and exercise their creativity and voices and shift the narratives about their experiences.
- **Sharing skills and resources.** Money is not the only resource funders can offer. Funders can share their skills, knowledge, and networks to support girls, families, communities, and community-based organizations in strengthening their networks and skills, which can then enable collaboration. An example of this is the Women's Policy Institute (WPI) run by the Women's Foundation of California. WPI is a leadership and public-policy training program that provides community leaders with the tools, resources, relationships, and coalitions they need to speak powerfully for themselves and their communities.

**RESEARCHERS** can eliminate barriers to the production and access of information and knowledge by

- **Decolonizing research.** Girls and their communities are experts on their lives and can lead the creation of knowledge as well as the translation of this knowledge into action. Research should be produced by girls and their communities with support, when necessary, by those who have had access to training on the execution of research. Examples of this include training girls and community members in the research process and design, and ensuring that girls and communities are leading the design, analysis, meaning making, reporting, and use of research.
- **Making research intersectional.** Individuals and institutions can design and execute research that disaggregates and analyzes data by important identity factors such as gender, sexuality, race, religion, and ability.
- **Making research accessible.** Federally funded research reports should be free and accessible to communities. Moreover, existing research information and knowledge should be shared widely and in multiple languages and formats—visual, presentational, video, audio—in order to be accessible to wide audiences, especially individuals who have historically been excluded from or pushed out of the education system.
- **Conducting and publishing more work with communities underrepresented in research.** This can include research with girls or racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and sexual identity communities underrepresented in the current academic and community literature. For example, trans-identified, gender-nonconforming, Muslim, Native American, Central American, Filipino, Samoan, Tongan, or Native Hawaiian girls.

The **PRIVATE SECTOR** can empower girls and the communities they live and operate in by

- **Including corporate social responsibility, diversity, and inclusion as part of their core values, and reflecting those values in their activities.** Enlist an expert to guide business practices, including hiring local residents, incorporating sustainability practices, and partnering with community service organizations and schools to provide resources such as job training, mentorship, and funding.
- **Understanding and taking responsibility for the economic and social impacts of business practices.** Corporations, specifically technology companies in the Bay Area, have significantly contributed to the rising cost of living and resulting housing insecurity and community displacement. Communities of color are disproportionately impacted. Businesses can engage with communities, learning from them in order to develop programs and practices that support rather than hinder local residents.





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**Appendix A: Data Collection Tools**

AGE: \_\_\_\_\_

**GENDER IDENTITY**

- |                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Female    | <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer to self-describe (write in): |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Male      | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nonbinary | <input type="checkbox"/> Refuse                              |

**RACE**

You may select more than one option.

- American Indian/Native American
- Asian or Asian American, including Chinese, Japanese, and others
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino, including Mexican American, Central American, and others
- Pacific Islander, including Filipino, Samoan, Tongan, Native Hawaiian, and others
- White, Caucasian, Anglo, European American; NOT Hispanic
- Other (write in): \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know
- Refuse

**DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF...?**

- |                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Straight | <input type="checkbox"/> Bisexual                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gay      | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lesbian  | <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer to self-describe (write in): _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Queer    | <input type="checkbox"/> Refuse                                    |

WHAT IS ONE OF YOUR LIFELONG DREAMS? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Listening Session Guide

### WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT (3–5 minutes)

We are committed to creating a fun and non-school environment in the room. The room will be set up in a way that supports an intimate environment. Each person will be welcomed as they come in, asked to sign in, and provided a name tag to write their first name on. Music from will be playing as participants walk into the room from the Spotify *Together, We Rise* Listening Session Playlist, which was created by the coordinators. The playlist is available on Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6rFW65KidR7yasy04V-JPSK?si=Ovo8t6UqSgyYNMDT2HPFGg>. The coordinator will select who will begin and which questions each person will ask. When a coordinator is not facilitating, they will take notes.

### INTRODUCTION (2–5 minutes)

The coordinators will begin by welcoming everyone. They will then announce that we will begin with introductions. Everyone will share their name, preferred pronouns, the school they attend, their grade, and their favorite thing about the Bay Area. Each coordinator will model first.

### INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES (20 minutes)

A. ***As the Wind Blows (3–5 minutes)***: Everyone will gather in a circle and stand on an X. The facilitator will describe the instructions. They will start in the middle and begin with, “The wind blows if you . . .” The next person in the middle will then repeat. The facilitator will have a timer and finish in three minutes.

B. ***Mapping Your Community (10–15 minutes)***: Each participant will be given a sheet of paper and two sticky notes. There will be two large posters in the front of the room. One poster will have the title “I like my community because” and the other poster will have the title “Challenges in my community include.”

Ask each participant to draw their community on a poster and identify in their community their school, home, and any organizations or groups they are a part of. Near each of the locations they can write the things they like and would like to see changed in their community. On one sticky note, they will write the words associated with what they like in their community. On a second sticky note, they will list the words that describe the challenges in their community. When participants are done writing, ask them to place their posters and sticky notes in the front of the room.

### AGREEMENTS (2–3 minutes)

The coordinators will spend two to three minutes developing agreements for the listening session. Each group must have as an agreement that everything that is said in the group will be held anonymous and confidential, which means no names will be attributed to any specific persons and the facilitators or those present will not share what is said with others; only general themes from the sessions will be shared.

Livier will mention that the only time we may have to break confidentiality is to provide resources and support if someone is being harmed. Additionally, if anyone in the room needs resources and support, Livier is a trained social worker and case manager; Livier will provide her information, as well as available resources and services.

### QUESTIONS (40 minutes)

After the agreements, the coordinators will gather everyone and begin to transition to the discussion questions.

Questions:

1. *[Round robin] If you had to tell a story about girls/young women in your community, what would it be?*
2. *Name an experience where you felt supported. Who was involved, and what happened?*
3. *Name an experience where you felt mistreated. Who was involved, and what could have made it a better experience for you?*
4. *[Round robin] What are the biggest issues facing girls/young women from your community today?*
5. *What are the things that get in the way of your dreams?*
6. *What issues of safety are or have been a concern for you and/or your friends?*
7. *What are prime reasons for stress in your life? How do you deal with stress? What programs/places do you go to get help with your stress?*
8. *Who are the people/groups that support you? When you need help, where do you turn? Who do you ask for help?*
9. *[Round robin] What do you still need? Want to be different in your community? What is lacking in organizations you are a part of?*

### CLOSING (2–3 minutes)

The coordinators will thank everyone for attending and participating. They will ask each to complete a demographic survey. Livier will collect the surveys and provide a gift cards. Livier will also collect name tags for the raffle.

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## Appendix B: Methodological Appendix

### *Youth Participatory Action Research*

The goal of *Together, We Rise* is to amplify and center girls' voices and experiences to create stronger support systems for girls as defined by girls. To advance this goal, Alliance for Girls (AFG) implemented a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach. YPAR is "an innovative approach to positive youth and community development in which young people are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them" (YPAR Hub, 2015). It provides young people with the opportunity to study, assess, and determine action on the factors impacting their lives, as well as to determine the actions to rectify problems (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

AFG selected YPAR for multiple important reasons. AFG has expertise in implementing YPAR based on its MGNI model. It is an approach that aligns with AFG's values of centering and elevating girls as experts in their own lives and the ones with the best responses to the problems they are facing, as well as working through an intergenerational approach. YPAR allows AFG to engage adult allies in sharing their skills and supporting young people in leading action-focused research.

Girls, who defined and identified themselves as research coordinators, were trained in the research process, designing and facilitating focus groups, coding and analyzing data, and developing recommendations for change. The coordinators designed the listening session format, a short survey to collect demographic and other relevant data, and an introductory exercise to collect additional information. The data collection tools aimed to collect information to facilitate better understanding of girls' lives as they related to a series of areas of inquiry. Rather than advancing this project through a series of core research questions, coordinators developed their data collection tools around areas of inquiry that they identified as important for advancing the goals of better understanding the experiences and needs of girls in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The coordinators were interested in structuring the listening sessions to facilitate understanding of barriers to girls' dreams and goals; girls' support systems; the practices and behaviors that embody support for girls; factors impacting girls' well-being and safety; and the solutions listening session participants believed could address the challenges they were experiencing. The coordinators were also interested in ensuring that listening sessions were implemented and structured in a way that eliminated or diminished differential power between themselves and participants and felt like girls hanging out. They developed a customized Spotify playlist, games, and art activities in addition to a traditional series of open-ended, qualitative questions for the girls. The demographic data collected through the survey aimed at capturing girls' self-defined race, gender, sexual orientation, and at least one lifelong dream.

Seven listening sessions were held across the Bay Area. Three sessions were held in Oakland, two in San Francisco, and two in San Jose. A total of 63 girls participated. One of the San Jose sessions was held with only self-identified teen moms.

### *Sampling*

#### Location of Listening Sessions

The listening sessions occurred in the Bay Area. For this project, "the Bay Area" was defined as the cities of Oakland, Richmond, San Francisco, and San Jose. While Richmond was a target location for this project, we were unable to secure listening sessions in that city. We were able to secure two listening sessions in each of the remaining cities: Oakland, San Francisco, and San Jose. This project employed two sampling techniques: purposive and self-selection. The project originally aimed to execute only six listening sessions. Due to the oversampling of Latina girls, however, a seventh listening session in Oakland was added. A total of seven listening sessions were hosted across the Bay Area.

#### Purposive Sampling

In the first phase of recruitment, AFG implemented purposive sampling. Based on the goals of National Philanthropic Collaborative of Young Women's Initiatives, the peer coordinators and AFG staff developed a list of nonprofit organizations that serve girls from multiple backgrounds and experiences, including girls in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, young mothers, girls with differing abilities, LGBTQ+ girls, and girls of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds. Staff then sent invitations to organizations asking to host a listening session or invited girls to attend a scheduled session in their community. A total of 23 organizations were contacted. The final seven listening sessions engaged youth from multiple organizations: the Bill Wilson Center, Dimensions Dance Theater, Girls Inc. of Alameda County, Mission Girls, National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Oasis for Girls, Planned Parenthood Mar Monte, Santa Clara County Office of Women's Policy, The Respect Institute, and San Francisco Department of the Status of Women.

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### Self-Selection Sampling

Once the host sites were identified, staff at the sites invited girls to attend the listening sessions. Potential participants were informed about the incentives offered for attending and participating in the sessions: \$5 Jamba Juice gift cards for each participant and the chance to win a \$30 gift card to a local store or venue through a raffle<sup>1</sup>. Girls invited were middle- to high-school-age youth who identified as females of color. While girls were invited to attend by the host organizations, girls had the option to opt in or out of attending listening sessions. While hosts extended invitations to their program participants, not all participants attended the listening session on the date and time they were scheduled for. In a few cases, girls entered the listening sessions, ate dinner, and stepped out; this included seven girls from one Oakland session. In other sessions, girls left without completing a survey; this included seven girls in San Francisco.

### *Recording Data*

Notes and recordings were taken by the adults supporting the youth coordinators at the listening sessions to capture the girls' responses. If girls consented, the listening sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed. If not, only typed and handwritten notes served as recordings for the sessions. Audio recordings of sessions were deleted after the recordings were transcribed. Transcriptions excluded identifiers from the text.

### *Qualitative Data Analysis*

Utilizing the project's goals and theoretical framework, the qualitative analysis started with some preset descriptive codes: 1) "Barriers" defined as factors that restrict girls' ability to be safe and happy; 2) "recommendations" defined as proposed actions to address challenges associated with restricted access to advance girls' dreams; 3) "system" defined as areas of influence impacting girls' daily lives; 4) "identity" defined as girls' self-defined race, gender, sexual orientation, and parenting status. Emergent codes were also developed through the use of open axial and en vivo coding techniques. A codebook was developed and the data were themed into groups. The qualitative data were analyzed on Microsoft Word using comments to code and theme by multiple people, including all the youth coordinators and report authors, to ensure reliability.

### *Quantitative Data Analysis*

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Print surveys were collected. Data from the surveys were then input into SurveyMonkey. Data from SurveyMonkey were downloaded, cleaned, and analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

### *Project Considerations: Strengths and Limitations*

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) benefits youth, organizations, communities, and the research and public health fields (Public Health Institute, 2012). Youth engaged in YPAR as leaders have the opportunity to learn and apply new skills through civic engagement and advocacy, which often translate into and enhance other aspects of their lives, including but not limited to increased social networks, confidence, and an understanding of the systems that impact their lives. Organizations supporting the implementation of YPAR enhance their leadership development capacity, create a pool of skilled potential employees, and engage with individuals and organizations who might not have interacted with the organization outside of a youth-led research process. Communities benefit from intergenerational partnership and enhancement of young leaders with the civic responsibility, analytical skills, and empowerment to address the challenges of the community. The research field gains innovative data-collection processes and reports, as well as access to information and spaces adults may not be able to reach. Public health is able to improve services, given that prevention and intervention programs aimed at youth become informed by youth.

As with the majority of studies, the design of the current project is subject to limitations. Purposive and self-selection sampling were chosen in order to secure the voices of girls, defined as "female-identified youth of color in middle and high school." Purposive and self-selection sampling, however, make it difficult to defend the representativeness of the sample and generalizability of the findings. This is particularly true with a small sample that overrepresented cis-girls, girls who identified as straight, and Latina girls. Although the youth coordinators designed the listening sessions to make respondents feel comfortable and safe sharing their honest thoughts and experiences, respondent bias was also a limitation. The listening sessions often engaged girls who had never met each other, and there was always at least one adult—a social worker serving as a mandated reporter—present at each listening session. This could have influenced girls' responses to the questions asked in the listening sessions. Moreover, although efforts were made to recruit multiple participants from varying backgrounds and experiences, the sample overrepresents cis girls, girls who identified as straight, and Latina girls.

1. The \$30 gift card option was based on stores or venues that were accessible to girls attending the listening sessions. Hosts advised AFG on the best gift card options to give girls. In the end, three Target gift cards, one Chipotle gift card, and two movie theater gift cards were raffled.



*the* WOMEN'S  
FOUNDATION  
*of* CALIFORNIA