Model of Girls* Empowerment

- Standards and Recommendations
Model of Girls’ Empowerment – Standards and Recommendations

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1 Introduction
This publication presents the results of a research conducted with various stakeholders involved in the project “Empowerment Education of Girls and Young Women. Through Educating Youth Educators and Creating Girls’ Centres” (no. 2019-2-PL01-KA205-066141) and offers sets of recommendations for practitioners and decision-makers. The project proposes the cohesive model of girls’ empowerment consisting of three pillars: “Operating Model for Girls’ Empowerment Centres”, “Empowerment Education Curriculum for Girls* and Young Women (13–22 years)”, and “Competence Model and Training Programme for Empowerment Educators”. Each of these elements were explored in the research that was a basis for developing good practices and recommendations for creating empowerment programs for girls*. There were twenty in-depth interviews conducted and one survey with the participants of one of the workshops that was part of learning training and teaching activities. The complementary data was also gathered through regular evaluation of the project activities. The group of respondents was very diverse which allowed analysing empowerment work from different perspectives. We interviewed girls*, their parents/guardians and members of local communities, empowerment trainers and facilitators of activities for girls*, teachers and academics, employees of public institutions working with youth, community organizers, and experts working for local and regional governments in three countries. This diversity of experiences and knowledge gathered in this project shows many dimensions of girls’ empowerment and various ways of supporting it.

The publication can be used as a holistic guide to launch girls’ empowerment projects or to focus on one of the proposals. Additionally, there are chapters on good practices in facilitating teamwork, incorporating the concept of intersectionality to empowerment work, and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on girls*.

In the publications we use the word “girls” with the symbol “*” to underline that empowerment projects are dedicated to people on the wide spectrum of gender identity, not only to cisgender girls. The LGBTQ+ acronym that appears in the text means lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer and the symbol “*” refers other gender and sexual minorities. In the project we use the term “people with disabilities” to underline that able-bodied people are not the norm and disability is a category constructed by society.

When we write about local, regional and national governments we mean three levels of governance. The local level is a city or a village, the regional level is a province or a state or a voivodeship, and the state is the highest level of government in a country. We also use vocabulary from the field of project management. The grant is a form of funding usually distributed by non-governmental organizations or public institutions to support social initiatives for a given amount of time. The organizations whose main goal is to carry out grant programs are called donor organizations. In the text we also use a term supervision, in this context it means that someone with more knowledge and experience oversees and supports the less experienced trainers or educators. The goal of the supervision is to assist the supervised person with their professional development.

2  Operating Model for Girls’ Empowerment Centres
The research of "Operational Model for Girls' Empowerment Centres" focused on three areas: the functionality of the operating model, the role of the centres for girls', guardians and the local community, and the impact of the centres on the local environment. Based on the findings the recommendations for practitioners and decision-makers were developed.

It is crucial to underline here that two empowerment centres that were part of this project differ from each other in few aspects of the operational model. Girls' Empowerment Centre run by Autonomia is the first girls' centre in Poland. It is funded by a non-governmental entity and it runs on the project basis. It means that there is a defined timeline and the centre needs to find a new source of funding upon the end of the project. The centre is a new initiative, started in 2017, in a new community that is important in terms of assessing the local impact. Girls' Empowerment Centre "Zımźtikën" exists since 1996 and was created through the initiative of the "Autonomous Centre for Women in Potsdam" (Autonome Frauenzentrum Potsdam e.V.). The centre "Zımźtikën" is funded by public institutions and after meeting the evaluation criteria it receives funding on the regular basis. Nonetheless the "Zımźtikën" also require project funds on a regular basis and through its long history of engagement and its connection to local communities, it managed to create a wide support network and include a diverse group of girls* throughout the years.

The crucial issue to understand and to explore the model for girls' empowerment centre is a social and political context in which centres are operating. In the case of Poland, since 2015, there has been a rise of anti-feminism, homophobia and transphobia, racism, and nationalism. The work for girls* empowerment, gender equality and social inclusion became a challenging one because of the cuts in public fundings and creating public discourse hostile towards such projects. Hostility in this context means that girls* empowerment projects are framed as a threat to the social order seen as a traditional division for gender roles. Girls* are denied their rights to self-determination, freedom of expression, and bodily autonomy. What girls* empowerment centres offer, is a safe space to fulfill their needs and interests as well as exercise their human rights.

### 2.1 Functionality of the Operating Model

One of the core functions of an empowerment centre is providing safe space for girls*. In majority of the interviews it was mentioned multiple times that centres created a space where girls* feel free, their human rights are respected, they can express themselves and learn how to take responsibility for their environment. Space in this regard means both the physical place and the more symbolic space of activities and being together. As mentioned by one of the girls, the centre is a place where she feels respected and free:

> The girls' meeting place is like a home. You can move around, meet new girls of the same age. You are not treated like a baby. You are given a lot of confidence here and you can move around free. (1.1)

Another girl attending the activities in the centre underlined the importance of the facilitators and their sensitivity for group processes. What she liked about being in the centre was quick solving of conflict and the help that girls* were getting from the centre's team. That was quite opposite of what often happens at her school where conflict among girls* are not addressed and solved.

The aspect of safe space was very important for parents and guardians. As they know that safety is one of the key principles of the model of empowerment centres they feel confident in sending their child there. They know where and with whom girls* are spending time. Additionally, they are aware that this time is beneficial for their self-growth. One parents stated:

> For me it was an obvious decision to sign her up for empowering activities so she can get to know herself more, learn how to make boundaries and also critically look at the requirements for girls and women made by the society. I knew it would be a safe space for her and she would meet interesting people. (1.4)

Another positively evaluated function of the empowerment centres is providing an alternative model of education. As interviewed experts underlined the empowerment centres take the process of education and community building outside of the formal school system. The formal schools reproduce the stiff and often oppressive model of learning that is based on the power relation between a teacher and students. For girls* in particular, formal education is connected with the set of social norms they are taught to follow. With time, girls* also meet their own space outside of a family. As an alternative to school and family, the model of empowerment centres offers a new space to experience what it could mean to be a girl*.

The research pointed out two important pillars of this alternative model of education present in the empowerment centres: the participatory processes and the horizontal structure.

The participatory process means including girls* in making decisions about the centre, such as the development of existing activities, an introduction of a new offer or an evaluation of the daily operations. It has been implemented in both centres in the project. What respondents underlined, both experts and centres team, is that the girls* feel listened to and can see the results of their decisions. Even simple issues such as a choice of game or a destination of trip make them feel more empowered. This participatory mechanism makes girls* more involved in the centre and also shows them that they have a right to be part of decision making processes that concern their life.

The horizontal structure of the empowerment centres means that the team facilitates activities and support the girls*. The team members are not figures of 'teachers' but together with girls* they are co-creators of the centre. This is a quite unique setting because in case of young girls* they are either surrounded by people their age (at school, extracurricular activities, summer camps) or by adults (parents/guardians, family members, teachers, instructors) so it is rare for them to build a relationship with an adult based on equality and cooperation. It was important issue for one of the parent:

> She liked to go there [empowerment centre]. She liked the space of the centre, that they could do whatever they wanted. It is also nice when there are young trainers so she knows it is not a teacher, not a mother but a person with whom they can find a common language and be equal. (1.4)

The third feature of the operating model for empowerment centres is the accessibility of activities. The model assumes researching the lowest barrier of entry possible. Ideally all the activities should be free of charge. It was mentioned in more than one interview that the inclusiveness and accessibility are important advantages of this model. The progressing privatization of extracurricular programs and the shrinking public spending on education make it difficult for
families with limited economic resources to ensure additional activities for children. In the model of empowerment centres their economic barriers are being addressed and the offer is accessible for girls. The empowerment centres that were part of the project have two types of activities: the structured workshops and open space in the form of common room where girls can spend time however they want. Some of the activities require signing up for and some do not have any requirements for participation. What is important, girls are aware that if they do not want to participate in a particular event or workshop they can simply just hang out with friends, read books or do homework in the centre. Besides the financial aspect, accessibility also means including other groups that are at risk of marginalization. Centres can prepare a building for people with disabilities or hire bilingual staff members. For example, one of the centres invested a lot in reconstructing their space for people with limited mobility, like removing unnecessary steps, remodeling the bathroom and kitchen and widening the doors.

2.2 Functionality of the Operating Model

The last element of the functionality of the operational model is the practical dimension of running an empowerment centre with a particular focus on the modes of funding. Based on the experience of two centres and the stakeholders’ knowledge, four models of funding were distinguished. They are described as separate models but they can be mixed and modified according to the local context. These models are: the publicly funded model, the project-based, the business-oriented and the self-funded.

The publicly funded model is based on the regular funds from the public authorities. The initiators of an empowerment centre should either look for the public funding matching the profile of the centre or start cooperation with public institutions, for example a local social centre, to develop offer for girls within its operations. One of the centres from the project has been funded by the local government for more than 20 years. What are the pros and cons of a publicly funded model?

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<td>- Public funds and cooperation with local and national governments can secure the long term funding for the centres. The continuity of running centres is essential in building relationship with girls. They need to know that the centre is the stable part of their life and the safe space in times of crises.</td>
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<td>- Security of public funding implies security of employment and with time, even expanding the team of the empowerment centres. It was underlined in the research that people in the field of girls’ empowerment very often works in precarious conditions. It means that they are hired on short term contracts or part-time so they have to work in many places or in multiple projects. It is a huge barrier for developing a stable relationship with local community and with girls. If the centre is funded as a public institution there are more possibilities of hiring people full-time on the stable contracts. It benefits the operations of the empowerment centres as a whole.</td>
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<td>- Having a long term cooperation with local governments can impact the priorities of the public policies and the evaluation processes. In case of one of the centres from the project, the experts of empowerment education are part of the group designing evaluation of youth projects, including projects dedicated to girls. The government is able to see on the ground how important and effective is the work of girls’ empowerment centres.</td>
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<td>- The biggest disadvantage of the publicly funded model is the risk of radical change in a government and sudden withdrawal of funding. The girls’ empowerment projects may not be given a priority because of the direct or indirect pressure from public funding institutions. The rise of the anti-feminism in public administration may be a reason for cancelling the funds for girls and, in general, social justice-oriented public policies.</td>
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<td>- If funding of empowerment projects is not secure by the law, a lot of time and energy need to be spent on networking in the political environment to search for support. Many of the initiatives for girls’ empowerment do not have resources to do so which pushes them outside of the pool of publicly funded projects.</td>
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The second model is the project-based one which means that the empowerment centres are funded as structured projects with the defined timeline. They can be funded by the donor organizations or public institutions whose aim is to support social initiatives within various grants schemes. Some national and international organizations have a regular call for project proposals. Depending on the organization, the grant can cover the entire project or just a part of it. Similarly, the timeframe of the project differs from a few months to a few years, usually it is about 2-3 years. One of the centres from the project was funded by a donor organization, the team applied with detailed project proposal and received the grant for implementing the girls’ empowerment centre. The pros and cons of this model:

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<td>- Independence from national or regional governments that do not prioritize girls’ empowerment within public policy. The variety of organizations offering grants for social projects allows to find the one that will support the idea. Additionally, the centre’s team does not have to be involved in unwanted political involvement.</td>
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<td>- The support from the international organizations, for example FORD The Young Feminist Fund or Mama Cash, gives access to the global network of similar initiatives. Quite often the donor organizations offer additional support for the grantees such as training, networking events, and wide promotion of the project that can attract more funding. In the long term perspective, the bigger and the stronger this network is, the easier it is to get funding on a regular basis.</td>
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<td>- For the first time-initiative it may be a challenge to find funding within the grant scheme because donor organizations look for experienced entities. However, there are also programs for funding pilot projects that can support the girls’ empowerment centres. One of the centres from the project received funding for the centre as a pilot initiative.</td>
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<td>- Each donor organization has its own rules and requirements so a lot of work needs to be done during the application process. This requires the work of a group of people to prepare the application form, plan the budget, and describe all the necessary details. Unfortunately, quite often this is unpaid work of the team members. There is always a risk that the project may not be funded. If your project receives the funding, remember to learn about the requirements of cooperation with the donor organization throughout the project and even after ending your project.</td>
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<td>- The project-based model of funding may be unstable. Dependence on calls for proposals and various donor organizations may lead to sudden lack of funding. It is a very difficult situation when the girls’ empowerment centres aim at building long-lasting relations with the local community. In addition, the rules of many grant programs are not</td>
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Flexible enough to respond to challenges of running a social initiative. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed a lot of weaknesses of the grant system; for example difficulties in changing the budget or moving parts of projects online.

The third model is a business-oriented model that assumes introducing business activities to run a centre or cooperate with business in the form of sponsorship. For example, the space of a centre can be rented out for private events and the profit funds the centre’s activities. This model as the only model of funding was criticized in the scope of the research. It is only recommended if mixed with other models and if the centre is not entirely dependent on the business. One of the centres had an idea to launch a business but there were no resources in the organization to do so. The second centre from the project uses the donations from private companies to fund some activities but the operational model of the centre is totally independent from the private business. One of the stakeholders stated:

We do have additional offers that are mix-funded, we fund some additional programs from donations, we have some funding from foundations, we also get donations from companies, but they cannot be a part of the operating budget for the base model. You need rooms, stuff, equipment, these things need to be there because it is public interest. Now if we think of additional things, like going sailing or having a new circus tent, I am perfectly fine with getting different sources of money but they don’t affect our operation budget as such, we don’t have to let somebody go because the company decides to cut off the donation. (1.7)

The last model of funding distinguished in the research is a self-funded one. It is the best alternative to previously presented ones in the sense that it is not dependent on any external systems of funding such as public institutions or business. However, this model is not based on the regular payments of parents for the activities as it will not meet the rule of accessibility. The self-funded model has two main assumptions. First one is that there is a community around a centre that regularly supports it financially. These are not only parents/guardians of girls* but a wide community of people who want to support empowerment activities. The community can be gathered through various crowdfunding websites. The crowd-sourced budget allows to run a centre without fees for the activities so it is open for all girls*. The second assumption is that the majority of work is done on a voluntary basis. Both parents/guardians and members of the community dedicate their time and skills to the centre. This model is recommended to be mixed with other models of fundings as applied independently it requires a lot of time to work properly.

### Pros
- The self-funded model is independent from the external sources of funding. The centre doesn’t have to meet requirements of any institution and it is not prone to changes in funding streams or in politics. If the community around the centres is strong enough there is a potential to have a long-term source of funding.

### Cons
- This model requires putting a lot of time and effort into building a community around the centre. There has to be a team that runs the centre and the decision-making processes have to be put in place. If there are no team members dedicated to managing the community there is a risk of losing the financial support.
- There may be factors that hinder the involvement of different groups of volunteers and consequently diversity of the centre team. Try to spend some time to get to know how voluntary work looks like in your community, who is dedicating their time and what are the obstacles to participating in a centre.

- The voluntary input in the centre may be unstable and unpredictable. One of the centres from the project had an assumption on using the parents’ support but in practice it did not work out. Due to unequal division of care work the majority of mothers wanted to leave the girls* in the centre and use their free time for other activities. That is why it is crucial to know what is the context of voluntary work in the community where the centre is located.
- In voluntary work there is always a risk of burnout, meaning the volunteers may run out of the energy to create a centre. So it is important to monitor the dynamic of the team and address the burnout when needed.

Described models of funding present the variety of possibilities of looking for the funds to sustain the girls’ empowerment centres. However, what was strongly present in the research is that girls’ empowerment should not be seen only as another ‘youth project’ but as an integral part of a democratic society. That is why the primary source of funding should be the public one. One of the stakeholders argued:

I honestly think it is problematic to have this kind of work not publicly funded. Because there is less democratic influence on the actual content of the work, like these would be sort of black boxes that you cannot see inside. As long as it is publicly funded there is always a right to see what is happening there for the general public, for the people like us who elect people and whose tax money is spent. Another reason why I am not a big fan of other funding models is that I truly believe that it is not a luxury, it is a duty of the state to provide this kind of work. And I don’t want to let the government off the hook. You don’t fund it because you are nice, you fund it because it is your job, our constitution says so, do your job. (1.7)

### 2.3 Role for Girls*, Guardians and Stakeholders in the Local Community

This following section of research aimed at exploring functions of girls’ empowerment centres by interviewing girls*, their guardians and people from their environment. The dominant role of the centres is supporting a self-growth of girls*. The centres provide a safe space, variety of activities and opportunities to be part of participatory processes. In many cases it is one of few places where girls* feel listened to and taken seriously. As one of the girls recalled her experience with sailing trip organized by the empowerment centre:

With sailing I didn’t know if I could do it. You become braver when you sail. You can grow beyond yourself. You can use all your strength when you pull up the sail. You get an effect from what you do. You get ahead. You become very independent. You are on your own and have to coordinate with the others. (1.7)

With time girls* gain more self-confidence and build strong ties with the community. The model of empowerment centres puts equal attention on individuals and collectives. Girls* are taught to respect and take care of each other. Two parents shared the stories of their daughters’ being bullied and discriminated against at school; one because of religious reasons and the second because of her appearance. They both noticed that participating in the centres’ activities helped their daughters go through and deal with the bullying. For other parents the centre is a place where girls* receive support with school work.
The girls’ meeting place was my salvation. When my children are welcome here. They met other girls, did homework and took part in all the activities offered by the centre. I no longer needed to help my children with their homework. I was very grateful that this centre exists. I would like all parents to know that this place exists. (1.3)

In a longer perspective, the centre benefits a wider community as it educates women* about their rights, about the democratic values and power of self-organization.

2.4 Local Impact of Centres

The assessment of the local impact of girls’ empowerment centres depends on many factors. In the research, two factors were particularly visible: time and political context. One of the centres has a long history of operating in the same place. Working in one place allowed building a strong relationship with the local community but also with a local network of social organizations. The second centre was looking for a proper place to rent and finally had to move to another city district. Because it was not a district where the organization usually works, a lot of effort and work was put into a community building.

Additionally, the second factor plays an extremely important role here—the political context of the country that shapes attitudes towards girls’ empowerment projects. There are two aspects of it. The first one is designing youth policies with the focus on boys as they are often seen as the ‘problem-makers’ and the public policy aims at organizing their time. At the same time girls’ and their needs are visible. Because they do not cause disturbance they are often excluded from youth, education, and social policies. The second aspect is the rise of anti-feminism that very often occurs together with the anti-LGBTIQ+ and nationalist rhetoric reflected in political actions. The girls’ empowerment projects are then framed as political indoctrination while in fact they offer girls’ safe space and guidance in self-development. Centres work on the basis of pluralism, inclusiveness, and anti-discrimination and goal is to empower girls*. This context of hostility towards empowerment projects is challenging for running a centre. The quotes below show the political context of two different countries:

The approach of the government to the centre has been more and more positive through the years. Because of the long history they [the girls’ empowerment centre] managed to become an accepted institution. They do not have to constantly justify their activities. There is a rise of right-wing parties but they are not strong enough yet to block the empowerment activities. (1.7)

We also had problems that probably would appear in other places as well, but here they were visible. Some parents did not agree for girls to come here because we are a feminist organization, acting for LGBTIQ+ community as well. There were situations where girls were signed up for a camp and then mother called and said she read our website and girls are not coming. (1.7.10)

With time and positive relations with the local community, empowerment centres can reach a significant impact. They visualize the needs of girls*, provide them with safe spaces and guidance. Many respondents underlined that community building is an integral and important part of the operational model for girls’ empowerment centres. They also shared good practices in this field. First of all, building a network with other social initiatives. Even if the local community may be sceptical about a centre’s activities, they are familiar with other local organizations. They will slowly get used to the presence of a centre if they see that it is a part of the local civil society. A centre could participate or co-organize local events, be part of local struggles or invite neigh-

bours to get to know each other (for example in the form of the open house day).

Second good practice is involvement of volunteers in centres’ activities. Volunteers can have different roles, for example supporting ongoing activities, leading additional workshops or organizing community events. There are diverse ways of working with volunteers but it is important to have a plan of how they will be involved. Girls* coming to the centre can also slowly become a volunteer, they can be given particular tasks and support the centre’s team. One of the respondents shared:

What I try to provide is to always be inviting and ask for help from the young people, try to include them in communal programs that they may not be part of. I repeatedly invite them to be part of the council and ask them for help, not trying to communicate that we are here to only support them but that we are hoping they support us. (1.9)

2.5 Recommendations

Recommendations for practitioners and initiators

- Start small: if you have limited resources. Maintain a building is a challenging task so you can start with organizing a girls* day in your local social or cultural centre when once a week there will be offer dedicated for girls* only. With good weather you can organize a centre in a park using an existing infrastructure or setting up a caravan or a tent. These steps help you with building a community around the idea of girls’ empowerment centre and developing your experience so you can apply for external funding.
- Assess your resources. Dedicate some time to map your resources. Try to think about resources that may not seem connected with girls’ empowerment at first, for example your contacts with different city departments, universities or local businesses. This ‘resource map’ will help you later on with the centre’s operations.
- Don’t be afraid to apply for funding. Do your research about the legal framework in your country and the international convention signed by the government. Use them to justify the need for funding girls’ empowerment projects.
- Think about the fundraising strategy. The good practice is to have a fundraising officer in your team but it entails additional costs. You can look for programs dedicated to social initiatives/social innovations and ask for support with developing a fundraising strategy.
- Depending on which model of girls’ empowerment centre you decide to develop, it is important to think about volunteers. If your model is self-funded you should have a person responsible for taking care of the volunteers.
- Work on the community outreach strategy. Plan what and when you want to do, create a timeline for your team, find out about community events you want to attend, set up meetings with important local stakeholders.
- Involve people from a local community to be future team members in the centre. This way you can build a sustainable relationship with the community.
- Plan the communication strategy according to diverse groups you want to work with. You may need to set up new social media profiles to communicate with teenagers or reach out to parents if you want to recruit younger girls*. Plan communication in more than one language or print posters if you know some girls* may have limited access to the Internet.

* To find out more about creating a team of girls’ empowerment centres see “Operating Model for Girls’ Empowerment Centres”, Chapter 7. The Staff in Girls’ Empowerment Centres – Function and Competencies.
• Think about people with disabilities, how to reach them and how to make spaces and activities accessible. Try to look for funding dedicated for accessible infrastructure to adapt your building for people with limited mobility or visual impairment.

Recommendation for decision-makers

• Include the empowerment education for girls* as an integral part of public policies regarding youth, education, public safety and social justice. Girls’ empowerment is essential for high quality public services as it reflects the equal distribution of public resources.
• Introduce gender mainstreaming and intersectional perspective in public policies. There should be a clear message that authorities and decision-makers support gender equality and take actions against gender-based violence and discrimination.
• Involve girls* and experts of empowerment education into policy-making processes. In particular, those regarding social justice, safety, education, and social matters.
• Empowerment education for girls* should be present in all levels of governance, including the level of the European Union. There is a need for a clear legal framework on girls* empowerment.
• Evaluate the implementation of international and national law regarding gender equality, anti-discrimination and gender-based violence prevention.
• Conduct an analysis of annual reports of social and cultural institutions from the gender perspective. The questions that should be explored: What is the distribution of boys and girls* attending youth activities? How offered activities impact participants’ understanding of gender roles? How are the public funds allocated according to the gender of the beneficiaries? What is the geographical distribution of funds for youth projects? Are there parts of a country where girls* do not participate in youth activities?
• Dedicate part of the funding for youth, education, and public safety to girls* empowerment projects or launch a grant program for empowerment social initiatives.
• Create an accessible database of communal buildings with preferential rent for social initiatives. The core idea of girls* empowerment centres is a physical space for girls* to meet and organize around. The communal buildings can be used for this purpose.
The Empowerment Education Curriculum for Girls* and Young Women* is an extensive publication with a solid theoretical framework and the sets of practical exercises that can be implemented in various contexts. The publication is dedicated to anyone who wants to get involved or deepen the knowledge in the field of empowerment education. This part of the research was focused on gathering experiences of participants who got to know the empowerment education framework during workshops organized throughout the project and the stakeholders with the expertise in the field of education and empowerment work with girls.

### 3.1 Effectiveness of the Methodology

The first issue that appeared in the research may seem obvious, however it has to be underlined: The curriculum is dedicated to work with girls* only, it makes their experiences visible and it prioritizes the challenges they face. Many educational programs for youth tend to generalize experiences and do not put enough attention on the gender dynamic between the binary categories of boys and girls. What the respondents found important in the empowerment education curriculum is that it presents clear approach and practical tools for particular issues that girls* deal with. One of the social worker mentioned:

> I have never seen a training dedicated for work only with girls, the majority of workshops are quite similar. The gender issues just do not appear. (2.1)

Other participant of the workshop shared her experiences of growing up and facing gender-based violence. She is now studying to become a social worker and she wished she had the opportunity to go through empowerment education when she was younger. She noticed that many women* wouldn’t have to deal with painful traumas if they had an access to spaces dedicated for girls* empowerment.

The effectiveness of the methodology has been a focal point of the interviews with educational experts. They pointed out four elements of the methodology that makes it a useful and powerful educational strategy. Firstly, the empowerment education curriculum is rooted in the girls* experiences. The process of education starts with recognizing their emotions, beliefs and struggles. Additionally, the main role of the trainer/educator is the facilitation of the process of education, not imposing it. Within this framework the main outcome is that girls* become aware of their right to be listened to, to express freely their needs, interests and rights, and to create boundaries within their relationships. The educational experts stated that it is extremely important to develop this attitude of recognizing one’s own experiences and own agency. Especially in cases of gender-based violence that is undermined and diminished, girls* need this empowered attitude.

This leads to the second element of empowerment education making it an effective tool and that is framing a girl* as an active agent and not only as a victim of violence. It changes a narrative about gender-based violence. Empowerment education recognizes the tension between an agency and victimization, and centres the aspect of self-determination. Girls* can grow up with the awareness that they are not responsible for the acts of gender-based violence, what is more, they will be equipped with tools to mitigate these acts. The curriculum includes practical exercises to facilitate this process. As one of the stakeholder underline:

> For me it’s very strong approach [empowerment education] because it shows ways to deal with discrimination. When we look at girls* in the 70s or 80s when it developed, it had a very strong deficit. There was a picture of girls who are weak... like they are the victims of patriarchy and victims of man and boys. With the empowerment there was a new point of view where girls could take actions, and they were not treated as victims. They were harmed but they can take action against this harm and I think this is a very strong point for empowerment is not to treat girls as victims.

The third element included in the empowerment education curriculum that increased its quality is the offer of practical exercises to be implemented in the work with girls*. Part of these exercises were presented to project participants who found them useful and inspiring:

> What I really remember was the book about sexual harassment and it was not based on some weird metaphor like there was a tree and someone is touching it, but it was a girl that was touched by an uncle and the trainers showed how to work with this story. (... I can see myself recommending this book to some psychologist working in this field for example. (...) I used this ‘strategies making method’, we talked with girls how to deal with violence and that each strategy is good, I tried to use the language from the training, I even had a few sentences written down. (2.1)

The curriculum contains tools that touch upon real life situations and shows an educator ways to approach them. Working with topics such as physical and psychological violence, bullying or mental health is not an easy task especially for someone who just started in the field. The participants of the workshop also pointed out that it was a space for them to get to know new people and exchange experiences of working in different countries. One of the participant found especially important that during the workshop there was a time to work on various strategies of working with girls*. In the daily work and with a big amount of responsibilities the trainers and educators do not find enough time to think about their work in the longer perspective. So the curriculum can be also treated as a help in designing long term strategies for girls* work both for individual educators and for girl* empowerment initiatives.

The fourth element mentioned by the stakeholders as innovative in the field of education is the approach to the relationship between teacher and student. The empowerment education puts attention on how the process of knowledge formation is being implemented. It approaches the person who teaches as a dynamic actor. This person has to be aware of their own experiences and perceptions of girls* work. Using the tools without self-awareness does not fit the model of empowerment education. One of the education experts explained:

> Another issue is that this methodology disrupts the power relations between the facilitator and participators. (...) It appears in this publication when there is a reference to Paula Freire and his education of the oppressed. He writes that this is not liberating some group from oppression but it is a common race, common action, getting to know each other and as a result of this process the individuals take autonomous decisions. (2.4)

Both the trainer/facilitator and girls* are actively taking part in the process of education. By achieving this equality girls* are practicing their agency. It is important to underline here that the facilitators are trained to take responsibility for this processes, the girls* are taken care of and given a space to feel empowered. The participants of the project described this self-work in the interviews:

> The reflection about myself is always really important for my work with girls because it affects how I meet the girls, how I interact with them and what I have to offer. (2.2)
I think that one of the good practices is to watch oneself, start with oneself. Having an objective view as possible on where you stand and how you got there. (3.2)

It is important that feminism stops being the feminism of white women from the middle class who already reached success and now are bending over other women. The issue of representation at the training of empowerment education is important, it takes us out of our belief that only our problems are important, it is good to be confronted with other perspectives. (2.3)

3.2 Adaptable Methodology to the Needs of Selected Segments of Participants

The diversity of research participants gave an insight into the adaptability of the methodology to various social groups. Nevertheless, for the more comprehensive conclusions the bigger research would have to be conducted. In one country, the methodology is used in the work with girls* from the care facility who come from families with a high risk of marginalization, often struggling with financial stability. The empowerment educator in this particular case, uses the curriculum to address gender-based violence and create strategies of dealing with harassment. The practical exercises are modified to the context but the overall framework of the empowerment education is applicable to the work with girls* at high risk of social marginalization.

The second context is which the curriculum is used in work with girls* who experienced forced migration and are in the process of integration in the new country. Two respondents worked directly with this group and found the empowerment education framework very useful. Girls* are confronted with a new reality and the empowerment activities create a safe space for them where they are not measured by the level of their integration with the host country. The trainers who work in the multicultural context also underline that the diversity among the educators is important so that girls* can find their experiences represented.

The group that were mentioned in more than one interview as the one that needs more attention are girls* with dis-ability. There are empowerment projects dedicated specifically for this group but some of the stakeholders stated that all empowerment activities should be accessible for people with dis-abilities.

3.3 Challenges

The research revealed a variety of challenges for the empowerment education activities. Some respondents pointed out that the empowerment process is happening within already existing structures of oppression. A girl* who takes part in the empowerment activities sooner or later comes back to the reality where she has to confront the stereotypes and the social expectations towards her*, for example at school. The educators should remember that the empowerment process is not linear, it can have episodes of slowing down or even withdrawn of some girls*. The awareness of how these processes work helps trainers and facilitators to prepare for the complexity of processes and periods of ‘crises’.

The second challenge that was identified by the respondents is the work that educators have to do in terms of self-awareness and self-reflections. As it was presented before, the empowerment education involve in the teaching process both the trainers and the girls*. The trainers should regularly self-evaluate themselves so that they do not victimize girls*, they set up clear boundaries and they sense being overwhelmed. Lastly, the interviewed stakeholders noticed that trainers often work individually in multiple places on short
contracts which make them isolated from the community of educators but also from regular supervision. So the cohesive model of empowerment education has to put attention on the well-being of the trainers as well. This topic will be elaborated in the next chapter.

3.4 Recommendations

Recommendations for empowerment education practitioners and initiators

- Find feminist and LGBTQ* initiatives, experts, researchers, and activists, to build a community. Attend workshops, courses, and other forms of gender and anti-discrimination education,
- Find allies for your empowerment activities. Look for similar initiatives, join local, regional, and international networks. You can exchange experiences, apply for funding in cooperation with other initiatives and receive support if needed. The political climate is very dynamic, in some countries it has already turned against girls* empowerment programs. That is why it is important to have allies in empowerment work. The strong network and support of like-minded people may help you to go through times of crises.
- Start empowerment education activities with small steps. Spend some time on preparing local diagnosis of what girls* in your environment need. Talk with a local social worker, meet with social and cultural organizations, and visit local schools. Organize an introductory meeting with girls* on how they want the activities to look like, where and what time they want to meet. You can adapt the empowerment education curriculum to girls’* needs.
- Invite and engage girls* with their peer groups. Make girls* feel confident to invite their friends for the activities, the process of empowerment education is a collective experience.
- Create space for girls* only. It can be even a time dedicated only for girls* within some organization. For example, if you hold empowerment activities at your local cultural centre try to organize it at time where there are no other classes/people in the building so girls* feel confident in the space and your activity is not interrupted.
- Incorporate inclusivity. Think how to make your program accessible for girls* with dis-abilities or with language barriers. Check if your city or village offers assistance for people with disabilities, such as sign language translation or transportation for people with limited mobility. Look for programs dedicated to newcomers that offer support with translation. All these solutions incorporated to your empowerment activities make it more accessible to diverse groups of girls*.
- Think ahead about the funding. You can try to find funding for empowerment education activities within already existing services like social centers, after-school programs, etc. The second option is to design your own empowerment education project and look for external funding. You can look for calls for application by signing up the newsletter of donor organizations, and following various social organizations. Do not be afraid to apply for funding with a bigger budget, you may not get it the first time but there are various options to get funded.
- Take care of supervision of your activities. Either if it is only you, or you coordinate a team of educators, try to find recourse for supervision of the empowerment program. If you are in the network of initiatives you can evaluate your work together. Finding time for reflection and evaluation is essential for organizing and delivering successful programs for girls*.
Recommendations for decision-makers

- Use the gender lens in social diagnosis and evidence-based policymaking. Incorporate gender in publicly funded quantitative and qualitative research about youth and ask for a short summary of main findings according to gender of the respondents. It gives you an overview of how the needs differ based on gender. Include other important group identity factors, for example race or economic status, to see how they interact with gender.
- Evaluate regularly social programs dedicated to youth. Set up clear goals and priorities for youth public policies. Analyze how the programs benefit girls*. Consult new programs with empowerment education experts.
- Include empowerment education in programs funding social initiatives. Set up a grant program for girls* or dedicate part of existing funding for empowerment education activities.
- Create opportunities for teachers and social workers to gain knowledge and skills in empowerment education as well as anti-discrimination and gender education. The pool of free (or reduced price) trainings and workshops can be created and be offered to educators who want to get engaged in work with girls*.

Competence Model and Training Programme for Empowerment Educators
4.1 Accuracy of the Competence Model

The competence model is based on the set of values, skills, and knowledge. The competences pointed out by the research participants to the great extent comply with the ones presented in the publication. The main goal of this part of the research was to confront these competences with the practical implementation.

One of the competences that was mentioned frequently is communication and adaptability to girls’ needs. The empowerment trainer should have an ability to process what girls communicate to them and then accommodate their needs. It is a challenge, especially when a trainer has a fixed workshop agenda that has to be implemented. Nevertheless, this adaptability is one of the core skills and could be gained with proper training and experience. As one of the trainer underlined:

‘Another thing is not to be frittered on one and only model of empowerment. I can imagine that in the situation of violence the best reaction is this and this but if the participants cannot do this and you can see that it is not their model of reacting, you should work with them to figure out the model of reacting that will be good for them. (...) So I have to come up with the new model but I have to do this with them because otherwise it will be a situation when a lady with higher education came and said what should be done and it doesn’t make any sense. (3.1)’

This quote also touches upon the second competence that is required from the trainer, self-reflexivity and awareness of own privileges. This competence was developed in the training for trainers and the blended mobility event. The participants had to reflect on their position in the relation to girls they work with. It means that trainers look closer at the intersection of gender, level of education, race, socio-economic status and how it influences their work. Another interviewed trainer spoke about this issue:

‘It starts with an objective view on yourself and then you need to deconstruct it, you need to figure out what it means to be white women in (European city), what privileges do you have, what obstacles you have, what similar obstacles you have with others but also what are the privileges that others don’t have. (3.2)’

The third competence described during the research as important is the self-empowerment of the trainers. As trainers are a reference point for girls in the process of empowerment they should be an example of an empowered person. They have gone through the proper training, e.g. to become aware of their body in order to be ready to share their experiences with girls they work with and to be seen as a role model. The empowerment of trainers also means the ability to set up clear boundaries with girls. This work can be intense and overwhelming because of the sensitive topics and a lot of emotional labour. That is why during training of trainers educators also receive knowledge about the group dynamic, communication processes, and interpersonal skills.

4.2 Training Programme Online and Offline – Effectiveness and Recommendations

One of the objectives of the research was to explore the potential of online and offline empowerment training. The majority of respondents stated that conducting training for trainers only in the online format is extremely difficult. To meet the goals of the training the offline meeting and the teamwork is essential. Some of the respondents see the possibility to conduct a hybrid training when some parts could be done online combined with meetings in person. The online training is unable to work on group processes, it requires more short breaks and keeps individuals isolated. While organizing online training a lot of effort should be put into ensuring the accessibility and safety for girls. They may be in the situation when home is not a safe space to participate in the empowerment workshops, they may struggle with equipment and the internet data or do not have capacities to spend long time in front of a screen.

Because of the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic some of the training in the project was conducted online. The respondents pointed out the following good practices regarding online training:

- Make sure participants not only have access to the internet and proper equipment but also know how to use it. You can organize a preparatory meeting to introduce the online platform of use. It is important that everyone will feel comfortable during the workshop.
- Plan more training time with more short breaks in between. Instead of full days, divide training for more days.
- Start with exercise which introduces participants to each other.
- Try to modify some of the physical exercises so they can be done by individuals.
- Set up rules for speaking, using the cameras and the group chat.
- Try to diversify the tools used at the training.
- Make sure there is translation/interpretation.
- Repeatedly confirm with participants that they are aware of the topic being discussed and whether they have questions.

4.3 Recommendations

Recommendations for practitioners and initiators

- Make a plan. If you want to start being a trainer, prepare a plan for job transition. Find local organizations that work with girls or have a potential to start empowerment activities. Follow the organizations that work in this field, they often offer training for trainers. A lot of them are free of charge or have reduced prices. Search for funding opportunities for training in your local job centre.
- Educate yourself. Being an empowerment trainer means ongoing education, being up to date with education theories and research. Look for projects dedicated to skill-building, re-
member that your qualifications and your work with girls* serve public education and should be funded from public funds.

- Don’t do it alone. It is highly recommended to conduct training with at least one more person. Additionally, be part of the community of trainers. The common support and supervision not only impact your work but also your well-being.
- Know the support services for youth and girls*:women*. There may be a point in your work when some issues have to be handled by other professionals like psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers or lawyers. Don’t be afraid or ashamed to ask for support and help.
- Think about financial stability. Unfortunately, very often empowerment trainers work on precarious conditions because of short-term projects or lack of public funding for informal education. Try to secure various sources of financial support, advocate for tenures for empowerment trainers.
- Be aware of burnout, just because you are an empowerment trainer does not mean you don’t go through crises. It is ok to look for professional help and take time off if needed. Try to think of ways to organize your work in a sustainable way. Supervise your work, use your networks of support, carefully observe how the anti-feminist, anti-LESBIAN, or racist rhetoric impact you. Find time to take breaks between trainings if necessary.

**Recommendations for decision-makers**

- Follow and disseminate the international and national recommendations on including empowerment and anti-discrimination education in all levels of education. Make sure that schools and universities preparing future teachers include empowerment and anti-discrimination education, and that it is an integral part of curriculums.
- Support and promote institutions, such as universities or non-governmental organizations, that offer comprehensive programs in empowerment and anti-discrimination education.
- Support the stability of the infrastructure and funding for empowerment and anti-discrimination education. Introduce necessary changes to ensure stable distribution of financial resources.
- Incorporate empowerment training in the pool of courses offered by job centres followed by structural changes to provide job positions for empowerment trainers.
- Support social projects that include the education component. Trainings for trainers are equally important as conducting girls*:women* empowerment activities. The more trainers there are, the bigger is the outreach of empowerment education.
- Do not base the empowerment education on short-term projects. Look for the structural solutions. Organize training for social workers from schools. Fund tenures for empowerment trainers on a regional level or in city districts so they can work with non-governmental organizations and schools.
- Hire empowerment education experts for policy-making processes. Finance and conduct need-based research with empowerment professionals.
- Include rural areas. Fund projects that train diverse groups of trainers and reach outside of big cities.
The topic that was present across all the components of the empowerment model is organizing and facilitating teamwork. The centres, the empowerment education activities or training for trainers – they all require having a strong and integrated team. The recommendations below were based on the experiences of different stakeholders with teamwork and group dynamic processes:

- The conflicts are inevitable and can be useful for the team. The empowerment work environment should be ‘conflict-friendly’, meaning the disagreements are discussed, facilitated and taken seriously. Find time to hold regular team meetings, once in a while organize a bigger check-in meeting with the whole team. You can use external experts to facilitate these meetings and support the team in solving conflicts.
- Make clear rules and procedures about addressing problems and challenges in the team. Once in a while evaluate if they work for all team members.
- Involve the freelance trainers/educators in group processes. Many of the empowerment projects consist of freelancers. They do not have to be involved in the organizational issues but they should participate in meetings that evaluate the activities, interactions with girls* and other trainers. Make sure in advance that they comply with the rules and values of the girls’ empowerment work. While preparing a budget for your projects count in the group meeting in the working hours of freelancers.
- Take care about the diversity of your team. Try to find ways to create the team that include various social groups.
- Give feedback. You work in a dynamic social context, the new activities may not be successful, you may lack funding or couldn’t reach a group of girls* you planned to – these are all issues that could be solved. The regular team meetings and evaluation of the work allows for noticing mistakes and redesigning strategies.
- Keep the joy in the team, as one of the respondents said:

  *With all the really serious business and important work, worrying, political involvement and need for action we also must not lose the feeling of joy and enjoyment of whatever we do.* (1.9)
Intersectionality is a concept that looks at different social characteristics and how they are interconnected. It was coined by the lawyer and human rights activists Kimberlé Crenshaw and inspired by the work of the group of Black feminists “Combahee River Collective.” Intersectionality allows us to describe and analyze how discrimination is formed and experienced on the basis of more than one socially constructed category. For example, how gender, race, and economic status interact and impact the social position of an individual or a group. The particular intersection of socially constructed categories puts individuals or groups at higher risk of discrimination and marginalization. In case of girls*, this mechanism works because they share two socially constructed categories: gender and age. In all the interviews the respondents underlined that intersectionality cannot be omitted in work with girls*. One of the stakeholder underlined:

Intersectionality is like gravity, it is there (…) and to not look at the intersectionality would be to ignore that, to ignore the reality. (1.7)

The graph below presents what social characteristics are important to be considered in a work with girls* as they may differ between each other within these features. If they differ too much from what is defined as “social norm” they are at risk of being marginalized. For example a Roma girl from a small Polish town is in a completely different situation than a white girl from middle-class family living in Krakow. This intersectional graph can be used as a check-in tool for educators, facilitators and initiators of empowerment processes. While organizing empowerment processes they can use it to check if they make the process accessible to diverse groups of girls*. 

Recommendations on incorporating intersectionality in empowerment education activities

- Take into consideration the differences in economic status and class, even if the activities are for free.
- Make your activities accessible for girls* with different disabilities.
- Incorporate education about mental health and make your activities a safe space to talk about mental health struggles.
- Girls* differ on the spectrum of gender and sexual identity. Make sure you use gender-inclusive language and consider sexual identities in sex education. In addition, educate yourself and all the girls* about LGBTQ+ community.
- Be aware of experiences of migration and different administrative statuses.
- While planning the activities or creating a community calendar ask girls* what celebrations they want to include, what days are important for them. Keep in mind the religious celebrations if they are important for girls*.

Recommendations on incorporating intersectionality in your team work

- Educate yourself. Use the opportunity for training and workshops from different fields to increase your team's skills and knowledge. The examples of classes/courses that make the team more intersectional: a sign language, a foreign language (of the community you want to reach in your city/village), the professional assistance for a person with disability.
- Educate yourself and a team about mental health. Try to find the funding for this additional education for the team members and volunteers. Keep in mind, additional training should be voluntary.
- Cooperate with different local organizations, organize common events or exchanges so girls* can get to know different groups of the local community.
- Try to hire diverse staff. Disseminate job openings widely, it increases your chances to reach a diverse group of potential new employees and thereby girls*. Support your volunteers with turning volunteering into an employment.
- Set up goals for increasing the inclusiveness of your empowerment work. It can be recording self-defence classes with subtitles or with translation, hiring a part-time psychologist, building a ramp for girls* in wheelchairs or organizing workshops in nearby villages/organize a shuttle.
- Remember, learning is a process, you can make mistakes. Incorporating intersectionality in your work is a lifelong task. Do not get discouraged, try and support each other in this process.
Impact of COVID–19 and its Gender Dimension
The project was taking place during the extremely difficult times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each country went through different forms of lockdown and restrictions. Each person participating in the research was asked about the impact of COVID-19 on the operations of girls* empowerment centres, education activities, trainings of trainers, and above all, on lives of girls*. They were affected individually as well as in terms of family and social life. The girls* and their guardians interviewed in the research underlined that the feeling of isolation was a dominant one throughout the pandemic. The online classes, the closure of extracurricular activities and restrictions of mobility shut down social life of girls* and cut them off from support networks. One of the respondents who coordinates girls* empowerment projects on regional level summarized the devastating effects of the pandemic:

**Trigger Warning:**

This quote discusses various mental health issues. If you struggle with the topics discussed, please look for support and help in your region. You are not alone in this.

I know from social workers that they have to deal with a lot of girls who hurt themselves (...). We had suicides, a lot of psychological problems, eating disorders, problems at home of course, it had a big impact on girls. But also small things like girls or women who are scared of men who wear the mask because they cannot read facial expressions so they are more often scared of them. Then we know about parents who isolate their daughters a lot, they are not allowed to go out. Of course abuse at home, sexual abuse... it had a big impact on girls. Also when it comes to helping at home, they do more than their brothers, helping with siblings, with grandparents, when it comes to care work. So they had very high responsibilities in their families. (2.5)

For many of the girls* the lockdown meant staying at home and being burdened with more responsibilities. The care work is disproportionately divided between girls* and boys. Some stakeholders said that girls* did not have enough time at home to study. They would normally come to empowerment centres but under the lockdown it was impossible. Many of them did not have access to proper equipment for online classes due to the gendered digital divide. One of the facilitators also noticed that after the lift of the restrictions some girls* did not come back for the empowerment activities. During the lockdown the communication with girls* was hampered, the facilitator and trainers lost contact with many of them. The online space was not enough for a sustainable and supportive community and now this community has to be rebuilt. This very exploratory part of the research reveals how much of a negative impact COVID-19 had on the lives of girls*. It also showed that the empowerment activities and safe spaces are extremely necessary because they are a sources of support for girls*.
1. Zaangażowanie dziewcząt*

- Słuchaj dziewczyn*
- Stawiaj ich potrzeby na pierwszym miejscu
- Wprowadź mechanizm partycypacyjnych procesów decyzyjnych

2. Zacznij od małych rzeczy, ale myśl na dużą skalę

- Zacznij od małych zajęć, wyraź jedną kiczę, warsztat lub przeszczerć tylko dla dziewcząt*
- Zbierz ludzi wspierających istniejące centra lub działania wzmacniające
- Wykorzystaj te wcześnie doświadczenia do opracowania większej inicjatywy i ubiegania się o dofinansowanie

3. Finansowanie

- Poszukaj różnych źródeł finansowania: instytucji państwowych, krajowych lub międzynarodowych organizacji darczyńców lub prywatnych fundacji
- Żąd wniosek o dofinansowanie wraz z doświadczonymi organizacjami lub poprosię o wsparcie w pisaniu propozycji projektu
- Stwórz określoną czasowo strategię finansowania

4. Dbać o swój zespół

- Organizuj regularne spotkania zespołu i sprawdź, czy jego członkowie
- Ustal procedurę ułatwiającą rozwiązywanie konfliktów
- Kształć się i dokładnie swojego zespołu

5. Zbuduj społeczność

- Wzięć udział w lokalnych inicjatywach i organizacjach
- Opracuj strategię pracy w wolontariuszach
- Zaangażuj się w lokalne problemy

6. Planuj i oceniaj

- Zaplanuj swoje działania i regularnie je oceniaj
- Zaangażuj dziewcząt*
- W procesy ewakuacyjne
- Nie wahaj się prosić o wsparcie