

# YOUNG, STRONG AND POWERFUL

UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITIES FOR  
YOUNG MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN



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# 1.

## CONTEXT – WHY YOUNG MOTHERS?

Girls everywhere deserve an opportunity to lead fulfilling lives – to survive, develop and thrive throughout childhood and adolescence. This should remain true for those who become mothers. And yet young mothers, particularly those aged 10–24, face numerous challenges that significantly impact their lives and the wellbeing of their children. Marginalised within their communities, they often endure stigma, harassment, and exclusion from social and political life, experiencing high levels of violence and discrimination. This isolation can prevent them from accessing crucial resources and services, including maternal and neonatal care, psychosocial support, and education, exacerbating the cycle of poverty and limiting their opportunities.

“*Teenage pregnancy is also a challenge in itself – it only increases the challenges we face on a daily basis.*” *A young mother, Kenya*

“*I went into depression because of that; I had no one to talk to. I locked myself in my room and tried to commit suicide, and it was not the first time...*” *A young mother, Kenya*

“*Most days are confusing because you don't know what to do and how to take care of your child as you're still a child yourself.*” *A young mother, Mozambique.*

“*When I got pregnant, my family hated me and discriminated against me. I met with some friends who guided me to start a business...*” *A young mother, Tanzania*

Girls' lives are marked by a range of intersecting forces of domination and exploitation. The gendered nature of poverty, and the very real ways in which it plays out in the lives, minds and bodies of adolescent girls, has particularly stark implications for young mothers. Early pregnancy marks a profound rupture in a girl's life – she is stripped of her childhood and yet is not afforded the respect and authority accorded to an adult. The circumstances of the pregnancy, often rooted in violence, are rarely questioned. As survivors, many young mothers endure a double-edged sword of unaddressed trauma and stigma, while navigating a new life trajectory. They find themselves solely responsible for the health and wellbeing of a new baby, while society systematically finds ways to punish them and their children for the reality in which they find themselves.

These challenges are heightened for young mothers with additional vulnerabilities, such as those who are very young or who have disabilities. Many of these mothers report experiencing systemic inequities, including discrimination from healthcare providers and barriers to accessing educational and economic opportunities. They are also often invisible to policymakers and funders, resulting in exclusion from programming, policies and funding streams. This nexus of vulnerability and invisibility can leave young mothers and their children without the necessary skills, resources and services they need to thrive.

This is all happening against the backdrop of increasing crises, including the effects of climate change. The impact of repeated extreme weather events, from drought to flooding, further compromises the stability which young mothers seek for themselves and their children. In such events, livelihoods and homes are destroyed, and displacement brings increased risks of violence. Essential services, including health and education, which many young mothers already struggle to access, are disrupted or non-functioning.

“Most men think of ways of taking advantage of girls instead of helping during floods, that is how many girls have ended up pregnant.”  
A young mother, Mozambique

“We are already struggling to get basic needs. When a flood comes, it takes you back even further.” A young mother, Mozambique

Faced with these hardships, young mothers demonstrate incredible strength and the will to give their children the best lives they can. They are also clear about the solutions to the challenges they face. For example, they push back against violent partners through the power they draw from their togetherness. They negotiate for resources and access together, and they model alternative ways of being together in the world. Even though many young mothers have never encountered the language of feminism before, they are activists – resisting, organising and working to build better futures for themselves and their children.

### About the Young Mothers Consortium

The Young Mothers Consortium is a bold initiative that places young mothers at the centre of power, decision-making, storytelling, and resource allocation across Kenya, Mozambique and Tanzania.

Supported by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and implemented by a four-partner consortium – the Children’s Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF), the Children’s Rights and Violence Prevention Fund (CRVPF), the International Resource for Impact and Storytelling (IRIS) and Purposeful – in partnership with community-based organisations, the initiative goes beyond participation to actively shift power to young mothers.

In addition, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) partners with the consortium to document our successes and challenges, and to generate robust evidence about the impact of this work on the lives of young mothers, their children and wider communities.

## KENYA, MOZAMBIQUE AND TANZANIA – DATA SNAPSHOT

Across Kenya, Mozambique and Tanzania, adolescent girls confront intense inequality, structural violence, and poverty. East and Southern Africa have some of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy globally.

**Mozambique has the fifth highest rate of child marriage worldwide and recorded 180 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19 in 2023, nearly double the regional average. At least one in 10 girls in Mozambique has had a child before age 15.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the wider region experiences 4,200 new HIV infections among young women aged 15–24 every week, with girls accounting for six in seven new adolescent infections.<sup>2</sup>** Extreme poverty, early and forced marriage, limited access to education, and weak health systems contribute to consistently high rates of early pregnancy and HIV. These statistics illustrate a shared and pervasive crisis that encompasses not only Mozambique but also other countries in the region, such as Kenya and Tanzania.

**In Kenya, approximately 15% of girls aged 15–19 have already begun childbearing, with over 260,000 adolescent pregnancies reported in 2022 alone.<sup>3</sup> Rates in some counties are even higher: exceeding one-third of all adolescent girls.<sup>4</sup> HIV also remains a major threat: young people aged 15–24 account for over 40% of all new infections, with adolescent girls and young women comprising the majority.<sup>5</sup>** Factors such as sexual violence, early sexual debut, limited access to contraception, and gender power imbalances exacerbate the risks faced by girls. These structural disadvantages are compounded by widespread femicide, with increasing rates of fatal violence against young women.

**In Tanzania, adolescent pregnancy affects 21–24% of girls aged 15–19, with some regions reporting rates above 40%.<sup>6</sup> HIV prevalence among adolescent girls aged 15–24 remains more than double that of males, revealing gendered disparities in exposure and access to health services.<sup>7</sup>** Low testing rates among younger adolescents increase the likelihood of undiagnosed infections and delayed treatment.

## In numbers...

3

countries –  
Kenya, Mozambique,  
Tanzania

19

local partners

1,200+

young mothers  
supported

1,200+

children  
supported

12

early childhood  
centres and  
day care centres

230+

businesses started  
or strengthened

154+

young mothers  
supported to return  
to education or to  
access vocational  
training

1

transnational  
convening –  
2 countries,  
39 young mothers,  
17 babies

1

storytelling  
framework –  
4 priority audiences,  
4 emergent  
audiences,  
20+ messages

Numbers are aggregated across partners

2.

## SUPPORTING YOUNG MOTHERS

Across consortium partners, we believe that the best way to support young mothers is to **shift power, information, resources and narratives**. Championing **young mothers' power and social capital** is central to our approach. We work to ensure they have increased access to resources and services, networks of solidarity, and the tools to navigate and negotiate the systems, services and stories that shape their lives in Kenya, Mozambique and Tanzania.

At its core, the purpose of this work is clear: to move resources and skills to young mothers so they can build collective power, fuel their activism, and strengthen infrastructures of collective care, transforming not only their own lives, but the futures of generations to come. We do this in the following ways:

- ✦ **By convening young mothers** within and across these countries, we create opportunities for connection, agency, and collective action.
- ✦ **Power-building and feminist education** are central to these spaces. We work with young mothers to equip them with the tools and knowledge needed to analyse the root causes of their oppression, challenge systemic barriers and assert their rights.
- ✦ **Shifting narratives through storytelling and collective voice.** Narratives about young mothers shape how families, communities, institutions and policymakers respond to them. Through storytelling, media engagement, and collaboration with artists, journalists and influencers, we work with young mothers to challenge stigma and amplify stories that reflect their dignity, power and lived realities.
- ✦ **Direct resourcing** is a key component of our strategy. Through a multi-funding, participatory approach, young mothers have direct access to resources to support themselves and their babies, while partner organisations are also funded to sustain their work.

In Kenya, Mozambique and Tanzania, **CRIF** partners with local organisations that serve as anchor groups. In Mozambique and Tanzania, the partners are community-rooted national organisations that are led by and serve young women and that focus on girls and young women more broadly. In Kenya, the partner is a community-based organisation that is led by young mothers and focused on them. In all cases, these organisations provide **accompaniment, resources, safe spaces, and community interventions** in support of young mothers. These partners are critical in supporting CRIF's community interventions, as they serve as liaisons between CRIF and governmental and community leaders.

## SPOTLIGHT

# A TRANSNATIONAL CONVENING OF YOUNG MOTHERS

At CRIF and Purposeful, bringing girls together is an act of resistance, healing and transformation. It is about power, sisterhood, solidarity, trust and girl-led ownership. In October 2025, we gathered 39 young mothers from Kenya and Tanzania at Lake Naivasha in Kenya. Through storytelling and the sharing of experiences and joy we created a care-centred space for healing, leadership, learning and movement-building. Young mothers came together to rest, dream, be visible and strategise – strengthening both themselves and the movements they are building across the region.

Throughout the convening, IRIS supported storytelling spaces, centring storytelling as a tool for healing, collective power, and narrative change, and supporting young mothers to share their stories from a place of strength and possibility. Moreover, ICRW captured key learnings from the convening through multiple documentation approaches, including observational notes, a panel discussion with young mothers, and key informant interviews with anchor organisation representatives and consortium partners.

Childcare was intentionally integrated into the convening. All young mothers were invited to attend with their babies, and over half did. Care services were provided to ensure participants could fully engage, rest when needed, and feel supported throughout.

The convening was participatory and grounded in care by design, recognising the emotional and social burdens many young mothers carry due to poverty, stigma and limited access to resources. Sessions opened with self-care and storytelling, inviting participants to share their journeys into early motherhood, family and community responses to their pregnancies, and the ways they sustain themselves through difficult moments.

Poverty and lack of resources emerged as key drivers of early motherhood, alongside a shared longing for safe spaces to release emotional weight, relieve trauma, and feel less alone. As trust deepened over the time together, the focus shifted to affirming identity, cultivating joy, and reclaiming self-worth. Through dreaming and creative storytelling, young mothers articulated their hopes for the future and the kinds of mothers and leaders they aspire to be. Conversations on sisterhood centred empathy, mutual care, and collective responsibility.

**A poem by one young mother** captures the spirit of connection:

*"A sister is the hand that shows up  
The voice that says you're not alone  
She is laughter in heavy silence  
Warmth when the world feels cold.  
Her presence is more than a moment  
It is trust, it is care, it is light  
Sisterhood is not just word  
It is love that always arrives"*

In Kenya and Tanzania, **CRVPF** and local partners equip young mothers with a holistic set of skills and support. In **safe spaces**, adolescent girls are guided by mentors who are also young mothers who have been trained and supported by CRVPF's partners. They gain **vocational training** to strengthen their livelihoods, enabling them to meet their own needs and provide for their children. Alongside life and vocational skills, mothers also learn positive parenting practices through the **Parenting for Early Childhood Development (ECD) Manual**, which covers nutrition, bonding, and male involvement in caregiving. While the mothers learn and connect in these spaces, their children are cared for at CRVPF-supported **ECD Centres**, ensuring their growth and wellbeing.

Across Kenya and Tanzania, **IRIS** leads the **narrative and storytelling** strategy within the consortium, working alongside young mothers, partners and cultural actors to shift how young mothers are understood and treated across communities, institutions and systems. IRIS works with young mothers and partners to identify **priority audiences, define emergent narratives, and develop shared message pillars** that guide storytelling, media engagement and advocacy. These pillars anchor all storytelling so that individual stories, which are diverse in form and experience, collectively reinforce a consistent set of beliefs, challenging stigma and building more just narratives that reflect the strength, power and dreams of young mothers. Through collaboration with journalists, artists, influencers and local partners, IRIS supports the creation and amplification of stories that centre young mothers' agency, dignity and lived realities, ensuring storytelling is ethical, participatory and grounded in their voices. In this way, IRIS translates young mothers' experiences into collective narrative power: shaping public understanding, influencing systems, and strengthening the broader ecosystem for change.

In Kenya and Tanzania, **Purposeful** partners with girl-led and young women-led organisations to serve as anchor groups for young mothers. These organisations provide **accompaniment, resources, safe spaces and support to young mothers**, strengthening local networks and deepening impact. Support is tailored to each young mother, ranging from vocational skills training and seed capital to material support that enables them to return to and stay in school. In times of emergency, approaches pivot to ensure young mothers have can meet their basic needs, for example ensuring they can feed themselves and their babies. Engagement is rooted in respect and attentiveness to context. In Mozambique, Purposeful works with a local, feminist consultant who is embedded in the cultural and linguistic context. This consultant is central to building relationships, gathering stories and facilitating safe spaces for learning and solidarity among young mothers.

**Documentation and knowledge-sharing** are central to this work. Throughout our work, we capture the realities, needs and priorities of young mothers, what becomes possible when they lead and receive direct funding, stories of resistance to violence and oppression, and emerging counter-narratives that challenge stigma.

By embedding **participatory decision-making processes** we ensure that the work reflects what young mothers themselves view as most effective and important. Through **cross-country convenings, advocacy support, and intentional partnerships with local organisations** we aim to build a movement that not only strengthens young mothers but also transforms the social and structural conditions shaping their lives and the lives of their children.



## REFLECTIONS ON THE YOUNG MOTHERS' CONVENING – ICRW'S PERSPECTIVE

The gathering also created space to explore power, feminism and leadership, encouraging young mothers to reimagine the systems shaping their lives. A financial literacy session grounded these conversations in lived reality, affirming that economic freedom is not just about income, it is also about dignity, confidence and decision-making power. This learning culminated in a participatory grantmaking exercise, where young mothers collectively planned, strategised, and allocated real resources in line with the futures they envisaged (see page 12).

*“Economic independence increases a person's choices. It increases confidence in yourself and your ability, and it makes you responsible.”*  
A young mother, Tanzania

*“Money gives you power of decision-making. You can make a decision and people can respect it even when it doesn't make sense.”*  
A young mother, Kenya

*“We should be informed and empowered to understand the essence of supporting a fellow woman. We understand and love each other and help with taking care of the children.”*  
A young mother, Kenya

The convening closed with the creation and validation of a collective manifesto – a declaration of hope and dignity and a statement of young mothers' demand. This manifesto was shaped through the storytelling and narrative work throughout the convening, where young mothers collectively named the stories they want to move away from and the futures they want to build.

*“We stand together, across countries and contexts, as sisters in solidarity. We are young, we are mothers, and we are powerful.”* Young mothers' manifesto

Read the full manifesto [here](#).

As the learning partner, we identified significant outcomes that emerged, including the following:

### 1. Strengthened power, agency and self-belief:

Young mothers reported an increase in their confidence, self-acceptance and belief in their ability to shape their futures. The power session was reported to be the most significant, offering a new language – “power within” and “power without” – describing personal agency and collective strength. Furthermore, young mothers reframed early motherhood as not the end of their dreams but a point from which to rebuild, describing themselves as leaders, changemakers and resilient women.

*“I learned that I have power inside me, and no one can take it away from me.”*  
A young mother

*“These sessions have helped me because they have made me realise now that I can make choices.”*  
A young mother

*“I have learned to value myself. Even if I gave birth while I was young, I learned not to lose hope.”* A young mother

### 2. Emergence of sisterhood and collective solidarity:

A major success was the creation of a strong, cross-border sisterhood. Participants moved from being strangers to seeing each other as “sisters” bound together by trust, empathy and shared experience. Storytelling sessions played an important role in reducing feelings of isolation. Beyond the convening, young mothers were making concrete plans to sustain solidarity through WhatsApp groups, joint business ventures, and a saving and credit cooperative organisation (SACCO), demonstrating readiness to take long-term collective action.

*“I have not made new friends, I have made sisters.”* A young mother

*“When I come and listen to the stories of other young mothers, you realise that your problem is small.”*  
A young mother

### 3. Growing awareness of economic agency:

Financial independence emerged as a central aspiration and protective factor for the young mothers. They highlighted the fact that **money brings respect, voice and autonomy**, especially in restrictive cultural contexts. Convening sessions, such as sessions on financial literacy, reinforced the importance of saving, investment and entrepreneurship, enabling participants to articulate practical financial goals. The young mothers' manifesto strongly urged funders to “trust us with money”, linking economic empowerment to reduced vulnerability, violence prevention and improved future planning.

*“Money gives you respect – especially in our African cultures.”* A young mother

*“Trust us with money. When we have money, we have choice: we resist violence, we start businesses, we go back to school, we invest in our children, and we plan for our futures.”*  
Young mothers' manifesto

### 4. A space of dignity, inclusion and exposure:

The convening experience itself reinforced young mothers' sense of worth. First-time experiences, such as flying and staying at a quality resort, made participants feel valued and respected. Facilitation was inclusive, multilingual and affirming, helping young mothers feel “seen”, safe and taken seriously.

### 5. Navigating persistent structural and cultural barriers:

Despite the personal gains they obtained from the convening, the young mothers continue to face external constraints that may limit their social and economic empowerment progress, including stigma, patriarchal norms, and judgement from family/community, which may continue to undermine their autonomy. Equally, poverty remains a primary driver of vulnerability, pushing some

young mothers into unsafe or exploitative situations, such as transactional sex. Lack of identification documents (IDs, birth certificates, passports) restricts access to services and mobility. Finally, some partners anticipate societal “pushback” as young mothers return home with newfound confidence and empowerment even as their context has not shifted to accommodate them.

An anchor group leader noted: “Poverty forces girls to engage in transactional sex or sex for fish to feed their families, leading to their commodification.”

*“Moreover, young mothers face lack of access to basic things like IDs. I have girls whose parents have just refused to give them IDs, some of them don't even have birth certificates.”*  
Anchor lead

### Conclusion: The convening strengthened young mothers' confidence, solidarity and financial aspirations.

To sustain these shifts, ongoing investment is needed in:

- Safe spaces and mentorship,
- Economic strengthening,
- Mental health and psychosocial support,
- Sexual and reproductive health,
- Childcare and nutrition,
- Community norm-change approaches, and
- System-level support to reduce structural barriers.

A significant and unexpected success of the convening was the strengthening of relationships between the anchor groups/local organisation leaders themselves. Whereas the primary focus was on the young mothers, bringing the anchor leaders together in a shared space fostered new connections and a sense of shared purpose. This led to requests for future joint work, such as cross-learning forums and collaborative projects. This result highlights the convening's potential not only to empower individuals but also to strengthen the entire ecosystem of support around them. These findings offer strong evidence of the transformative potential of centring young mothers' power, choices and collective agency.

## SPOTLIGHT

# WHAT DOES PARTICIPATORY GRANTMAKING LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

CRIF's model of participatory grantmaking is rooted in the belief that members of the community are subject matter experts on their needs, and therefore on the interventions which will serve their community best. In this work on young mothers in particular, this meant deep and continuous engagement with young mothers and their allies.

These engagements centred first on listening and learning: seeking to understand and contextualise the experiences of young mothers within communities, including the factors that drive early motherhood. As part of the participatory process, the most common themes and subsequent funding priorities were identified, and these were re-shared with the young mother cohort for interrogation and validation. The process of **listening, reporting and validation** until all participants felt heard and represented within the decisions being made was central to our process of grantmaking.

In 2024 and 2025, through anchor partners, CRIF distributed funding in accordance with the aforementioned priorities. This included meaningful access to education and trainings, increased access to care support for children, technological access and training, financial literacy and access, support for other organisations within mothers' communities, and expansion of peer-to-peer learning and safe spaces to other girls, young women, and young mothers within their communities, among others. Now that we have begun to see this model work, we look forward to continuing to iterate and expand this work as we recognise that participatory grantmaking is a process which should continue to evolve. As the most basic needs of the young mothers in the cohorts are met, the goals, dreams and desires of the young mothers will also continue to evolve.

CRIF's model of participatory grantmaking was also applied during the **in-person convening at Lake Naivasha in 2025**. The convening co-hosts, CRIF and Purposeful, pooled \$50,000 (USD) to allow young mother participants who attended the convening to direct resources towards work that serves their regional communities and helps them build movements across the region. It was intentional that this portion of funds was not in support of individual communities, since throughout the convening the value of regional movement-building and opportunities for attendees to re-engage with each other were listed as key priorities.

Through a process of group work, young mothers dreamed together and crowdsourced funding priorities. In a plenary discussion, facilitated by CRIF and Purposeful, they shared, interrogated, compromised and came to a consensus on those priorities. They then started a process of allocating funding to each area. Each young mother had three tokens, worth approx. \$450 each – they moved money between priorities as each area was re-evaluated and re-affirmed when real money was put on the table. This resulted in the following priorities and allocations:

- Communication devices: \$10,500
- Business capital: \$9,300
- Junior savings accounts: \$5,300
- Mothers' saving accounts \$5,300
- In-person meeting: \$5,300
- Village savings and loans: \$4,500
- Exchange of resources: \$4,000
- Investing in stocks and shares: \$3,200
- Emergency funds: \$2,700

In all cases, the model of participatory grantmaking places community members at the centre, enabling CRIF to resource at the intersection of need, value and potential for social change. Even though the work is still continuing, this approach has already shown promising results.

## SPOTLIGHT

# THE LIGHT SHE CARRIES

## "If I Can Keep Moving Forward, So Can You" – Sinyati's Story

In many cultures across sub-Saharan Africa, child marriage continues to disrupt the lives of adolescent girls – girls who deserve to grow up in safety, pursue an education, and reach their potential. Sinyati, a 20-year-old mother of one from Lenjani, Tanzania, was forced into marriage at just 14 years old. She remembers the words her mother told her when she resisted:

*"All the dowry cattle have been paid. Where will we find cattle to return if you continue school and don't get married? Please, my child, build your life through this marriage."*

At that time, Sinyati had just excelled in her primary school exams and she dreamed of an independent life through pursuing further education. However, as a young girl still living under her parents' roof, where obedience was expected, she eventually gave in to pressure and married at 14. Over time, she grew to care for her husband, and together they had a child, now two years old. Yet life was far from the independence she once imagined.

*"I used to just stay at home, clean, farm, take care of the goats, my husband and my child. I could not earn my own money – this is not what I wanted. But I was lucky to marry a young man; it could have been much worse."*

That spark of resilience Sinyati carried as a girl never truly went out. When she joined the Young Mothers Project, facilitated by the Jamii Yetu Cluster, her spirit of independence was rekindled. In a safe space, she received training in soap-making, cooking and traditional Maasai beadwork.

## THE LIGHT SHE CARRIES

A collection of stories about resilience, sisterhood, and the unbroken dreams of young mothers.



Beyond skills, the safe space also gave her a family outside her own. Together with other young mothers, she formed a beadwork group that sells their crafts and is slowly reaching new markets.

Through this group, Sinyati now works from home, earns her own income, contributes to her family's needs, and draws strength from the sisterhood that is made up of the women who stand with her.

This story is an extract from CRVPF's *The Light She Carries*, a collection about resilience, sisterhood and the unbroken dreams of young mothers. Read the full publication [here](#).

# BUILDING NARRATIVE POWER WITH AND FOR YOUNG MOTHERS

Young mothers face deeply entrenched stigma, shaped by dominant narratives that frame them as irresponsible, as defined by a single moment in their lives, and as undeserving of investment. These narratives do not only shape perceptions: they also shape young mothers' and their children's access to education, healthcare, protection and opportunities. Shifting these conditions requires transforming the stories that shape how young mothers are seen, treated and supported, by families, communities, institutions and systems.

## From stigma to narrative power

IRIS worked across the consortium to bring together existing research,<sup>i</sup> partner insights, and the lived experiences of young mothers to develop a shared narrative framework. This process included analysis of multiple studies and a participatory validation process with young mothers across contexts. This was further validated during an in-person narrative and storytelling workshop in Nairobi, resulting in:

- ✦ **Four priority audiences** being identified as critical to shifting outcomes for young mothers and their children,
- ✦ **A set of emergent narratives** that are grounded in what young mothers want these audiences to believe about them and their children, and
- ✦ **Shared message pillars**, to ensure that stories, media and advocacy reinforce a consistent shift over time

Together, this creates a clear narrative architecture: ensuring that individual stories, while diverse, collectively move towards a shared set of beliefs.

At the heart of this shift is a reframing of what it means to be a young mother. As one participant shared during the narrative and storytelling workshop in Nairobi: *"Becoming a young mother is a comma, not a full stop."* This captures the core of one of the emergent narratives identified by young mothers across audiences: that young mothers are not defined by early motherhood, but are capable, worthy, and actively shaping their futures and those of their children.

The narrative and storytelling work also addresses internalised stigma, supporting young mothers to see themselves as leaders, decision-makers and storytellers with the power to influence their families, communities and systems.

## From strategy to stories in the world

Building on this foundation, the next phase of the work focuses on ensuring these narratives are carried by those who shape public understanding and everyday norms, especially within our key audiences. This includes the following initiatives:

- ✦ **Journalism training and media engagement:** In partnership with Docubox, IRIS is working with journalists, influencers and digital storytellers across local, national and regional platforms to shift how stories about young mothers are told, grounding reporting in dignity, context, and the futures young mothers envision.
- ✦ **Embedded artists and cultural storytelling:** Artists, filmmakers, poets and content creators are working alongside young mothers and partners to co-create stories that are locally rooted, emotionally resonant, and aligned with the shared narrative framework.
- ✦ **Content fund and local activation:** A dedicated content fund is supporting partners to partner with creators to produce and distribute stories across multiple platforms, from community radio and WhatsApp groups to national media and digital channels, ensuring narratives reach the audiences that shape young mothers' lives.

## Towards a new common sense

This work recognises that narrative change is cumulative. One story alone does not shift belief, but many stories, told across contexts by trusted messengers and grounded in shared narratives, can begin to reshape what is seen as normal, possible and true. By anchoring storytelling in young mothers' voices, priorities and dreams, this effort is working to move from a dominant narrative of stigma and limitation to one of power, dignity and possibility, transforming how young mothers are seen, and, most importantly, how they are supported.



<sup>i</sup> Lived Realities, Restoring Her Dignity, In Her Words

### 3.

## WHAT CHANGE IS HAPPENING?

While this work with and for young mothers is still in its formative stages, changes are emerging at individual and systemic levels.

### Safe spaces cultivate confidence and agency

Young mothers are demonstrating growing confidence, solidarity and agency. When asked what helps them find strength, especially on difficult days, many pointed first to the safe spaces created through the consortium partners and anchor groups. These spaces have become places of honesty and care, where young mothers feel free to share both their challenges and their aspirations. Within their groups, they speak more openly about their lives, exchange ideas, and begin to imagine futures beyond survival.

Within the safe spaces, tangible personal transformations are unfolding. One young mother, once shy and isolated, now engages confidently with peers and has formed meaningful friendships. Another young mother, who was experiencing abuse from her partner, was able to confide in the group. With collective support, she was temporarily housed by another young mother and later reunited with her family in her village, where she now feels safe.

Through these collective safe spaces, young mothers are actively rebuilding their sense of self and possibility. One young mother shared: "I want to be a reliable, responsible and loving mother. I want my daughter to see me as a loving and understanding mother. I want to be a business owner, an advocate and a billionaire." Her words reflect a broader shift that this investment is bringing about: young mothers are not only nurturing their children but also daring to build dreams for themselves.

### Improved wellbeing through sisterhood and collective care

At the heart of this transformation is sisterhood and collective care. Young mothers described sisterhood as a deep and meaningful bond, one rooted in trust, emotional presence, and mutual accountability. It means listening without judgement, offering empathy during hardship, and showing up consistently, not only in moments of crisis. A sister, they explained, is someone who supports, understands, protects confidentiality, and remains committed for the long term. Through this collective care, many young mothers feel encouraged, countering the isolation they previously experienced, pointing to improvements in their mental health and wellbeing. One young mother from Kenya described sisterhood as:

*"...a deep and meaningful bond between women that goes beyond mere friendship and shared experiences. Their support makes me feel favoured and needed. It is an emotional presence – listening to your sister without judgement and offering empathy when she is struggling. It is quality time – spending time together and making an effort to check in not only when it is hard. A sister is a person who is ready to support, understand, love and be secretive. They have positive thoughts. A sister should not be a backbiter, she should be loving, understanding, supportive, loving and a life-long partner."*

Another shared: *"Sisterhood is so powerful, when I first shared my story I really cried, but now I don't take it as a weakness but a chance and something to motivate me to move forward."*

### Rebuilding sense identity, aspiration and possibility

Young mothers at the convening also emphasised the value of difference. As one young mother noted: "We need to understand each other because we are different – but we are all unique, with special talents. If we combine our ideas and talents, we can create something unique and profitable." This recognition of collective strength has fostered positive thinking and a growing belief in shared success.

### Disrupting the trajectory for the next generation

Young mothers are also envisioning better lives for their children. They are investing their skills, knowledge and resources in their babies and young children, while actively planning for the future. Many shared their fears about raising their children, alongside their deep hope that they can build safer, more supportive communities where their children can thrive.

*"I want to be a friend to my girl, a comfort, safe space, loving and caring mom. I want my daughter to see me as supportive and understanding."*  
**A young mother, Tanzania**

*"I want to give back to my community. I want my child to grow up in a place where he is not discriminated against because I am a young mother. I also don't want other girls to go through what I have been through, and I want to support other young mothers."*  
**A young mother, Kenya**

The young mothers are committed to being good parents and recognise that maintaining a healthy mental state is essential in order to be able to provide the care, support and love their children need. Some young mothers are gaining practical parenting skills and their children are accessing critical ECD services, supporting their cognitive, social, emotional and physical growth.

### Growing voice, participation, and collective leadership

Anchor groups have observed this shift firsthand. They highlighted the young mothers' growing confidence and active participation, noting that young mothers are increasingly vocal about their needs and ideas. Many are now thinking beyond their immediate communities, expressing ambitions to expand their businesses, increase visibility, and strengthen accountability. A team member from one of our anchor groups shared:

*"I am so proud of the progress these young mothers are making. Their confidence is growing, and they are actively participating in every aspect of our work. They speak up about their needs and ideas, even suggesting changes to the budget. They are eager to expand their businesses beyond their communities..."*

Young mothers are actively brainstorming learning priorities: they have identified childcare, parenting and digital retail as essential skills. They are also expressing a strong desire to deepen their understanding of sexual and reproductive health and rights, recognising the connection between knowledge, autonomy and long-term wellbeing.

## Economic empowerment and independence

Economic empowerment is also beginning to take root. Many young mothers have engaged in skills training and are using their new skills to generate income, with some now able to afford daycare – an important step towards greater independence and stability. Several young mothers have started small businesses and are speaking up more confidently within their communities. As one of our anchor groups reflected:

*“Following a refresher session, the young mothers developed individual business plans and will soon receive start-up capital to address their financial challenges. Each woman will run her own small business to meet personal needs, while also contributing to a collective business...”*

These shifts point to deeper systemic changes:

- 1. First, trust is being rebuilt.** Young mothers shared that funders often disappear after “taking their stories.” This time, they have experienced presence, resourcing, and follow-through. One of them recalled that Purposeful had funded them “as promised, true to their word,” which leads others to believe in the process.
- 2. Second, stigma is beginning to break.** When communities see young mothers convening with external partners, their social standing improves. Young mothers described a renewed sense of dignity and recognition. Stigma is further challenged when communities see young mothers taking action for themselves and their children, from taking up training opportunities and starting small businesses, to creating collective childcare support and prioritising education.
- 3. Third, young mothers are actively planning for their futures.** Across convenings and spaces, young mothers articulated a shared determination to break cycles of poverty, keep their children safe and ensure they remain in school and are well-nourished, and build sustainable livelihoods.

Finally, a movement is forming. There is a clear and growing appetite for a transnational young mothers’ movement – one that connects across borders, advocates collectively, and places young mothers in leadership.

## Building the evidence base

During the period in which this publication was being drafted, ICRW has been administering a status assessment across a sample of young mothers in Kenya, Mozambique and Tanzania. Using a mixed methods approach, this assessment seeks to understand the implementation status of this work, and its influence on the lives of young mothers and their children to date. This will explore shifts in livelihoods and income, experience of violence, confidence, identity, wellbeing and community perceptions, and will offer deep-dive case studies on partners’ approaches.

**The findings of the assessment will be available in July 2026.**

## 4.

## WHAT ARE WE LEARNING?

As we move forwards on this journey with partners and young mothers, we are carving out time to reflect, learn and build together. These early learnings are relevant for anyone working with adolescent girls and young women, it includes young mothers themselves, those investing in ECD, or anyone making grants to grassroots organisations.

- ✦ Young mothers are strategic agents of change, economically ambitious and committed to breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty.** Many young mothers are already engaged in small businesses or skilled work, with concrete aspirations: buying land, renting catering space, acquiring tailoring equipment, and expanding existing enterprises. What they lack is capital. At the same time, many carry the weight of having been raised by young mothers themselves, and are determined that their children will not face the same struggles. Young mothers consistently articulate plans to protect their children, keep them in school, ensure they have access to vaccines and nutritious food, and create safer living conditions.
- ✦ Safe spaces are foundational for work with and for girls and young women, including young mothers.** Time and time again, across our work, we are reminded that safe spaces are essential for supporting wellbeing and building connections among girls and young women, including young mothers and their allies. They help reduce the deep isolation and stigma faced by young mothers and their children, while strengthening power, agency and collective identity. They offer a dedicated space where young mothers can be together, often in the absence of other opportunities to gather.
- ✦ In-person convenings accelerate movement-building.** Young mothers want to connect across communities and countries, to share and amplify their stories, even when doing so is emotionally difficult. They are willing to speak because they believe their voices can change their lives and the futures of their children. Convenings create spaces for leadership, collective decision-making, and alignment around shared priorities, while also linking young mothers to broader advocacy and policy spaces.
- ✦ You cannot truly build power without moving money.** When girls and young women control financial resources, they can make meaningful choices for themselves, their families and their futures. Trusting them with money is not optional; without it, their choices are limited, their voices silenced, and their autonomy compromised. Our work with girls in Sierra Leone has shown this clearly. True power comes not just from participation, but from access, control and the freedom to decide – resources in young women’s hands are the foundation for real change.
- ✦ A participatory, young mother-led grantmaking approach is essential.** Our engagement with young mothers over the last year has confirmed our belief that when young mothers are invited to build a strategy together, and to think critically about how resources can be leveraged, they surface a deep understanding of the cycles of poverty shaping their lives and the futures of their children – and the solutions required to shift them.

**✦ ECD centres are not just a service for children, but also an enabler of opportunity for mothers.** When young mothers have a reliable and safe place to leave their children, they are empowered to reintegrate into the formal education system, run businesses, and/or meaningfully participate in safe space activities. Access to ECD centres removes a practical barrier to their participation in socio-economic opportunities and services, helping them prepare and plan for their futures.

**✦ Governments have a critical role to play in supporting ECD, and therefore supporting young mothers.** It is often assumed that government institutions are opposed to initiatives that support young mothers returning to school. In practice, this resistance is often grounded in a concern about the burden these initiatives can place on public systems and resources. Experience shows that when there is someone within government to champion and drive ECD forward, government institutions can and do provide meaningful support. A concrete example can be seen in Kenya, where ECD centres are receiving a government contribution of approximately \$5 per child per month to cover feeding costs. This demonstrates what is possible when the right advocacy and partnership are in place.

**✦ Young mothers are disproportionately impacted by climate change but have clear strategies for preparation and response.** We heard directly from young mothers in Mozambique about how communities are already building sophisticated systems of anticipatory action: harvesting crops before storms hit, reinforcing foundations by planting grass, and pooling resources and skills to rebuild. Young mothers are not waiting for formal humanitarian aid to reach them, they create their own networks of mutual aid. It is evident that, in the face of climate change, young mothers have knowledge and strategy that are already in motion. They are clear that direct resources will further spark and sustain their ability to meet crises when they occur — in particular by establishing climate-resilient livelihoods.

**✦ Trust based, non-extractive partnerships are non-negotiable.** Young mothers have expressed mistrust shaped by past experiences with funders who extracted their stories and disappeared. For us, this meant ensuring more intention, more listening and more communication with these young mothers.

**✦ How funders and partners show up in communities shapes legitimacy.** How funders and partners show up in communities directly shapes how young mothers are seen and treated. When funders and partners visibly convene with young mothers, listening and learning from them, it helps to reduce stigma and shifts negative narratives that situate young mothers as a problem. Showing up with respect, consistency, and accountability gives young mothers the confidence to advocate for themselves, mentor others, and actively participate in shaping their communities.

**✦ We cannot do this work without strong, locally networked organisations and allies.** Anchor groups hold trust, contextual knowledge, and long-standing relationships with young mothers. Our role is not simply to fund these organisations, but to accompany them – supporting their leadership, amplifying their work, and investing in the unique positions they occupy within their communities. This has required us to be thoughtful in our engagement, practising deep listening and remaining accountable to those who are rooted in local realities.

**✦ Narratives shape access to resources, services and protection.** Dominant narratives about young mothers directly influence how families, communities and institutions respond to them. Stigma can justify exclusion from education, judgement in healthcare settings, inconsistent protection, and limited economic opportunity. Shifting these narratives is therefore foundational to improving outcomes. As more nuanced and dignified narratives take hold, they begin to influence how young mothers are treated across systems.

**✦ Creating space for narrative agency changes what stories become possible.** Across the storytelling work we have seen that young mothers, like many marginalised groups, often feel an implicit pressure to tell stories that centre pain, hardship, or what they think others expect to hear. Without intentional space and support, storytelling can unintentionally reinforce narrow or deficit-based narratives. When young mothers are supported to tell their stories from a place of agency, something different emerges. Stories become more complex and complete, conveying both challenge and possibility. Alongside experiences of stigma and hardship, young mothers speak to their dreams, their strength, their pride, and the futures they are actively building for themselves and their children. This shift is not only personally transformative: it is essential for narrative change. Expanding the range of stories that are told, and who feels able to tell them, helps move public understanding away from a single story of limitation towards a more accurate and dignified narrative of young mothers' lives.

**✦ Narrative change requires coherence, not just more stories: Individual stories alone are not enough to shift dominant narratives.** Without a shared narrative direction, storytelling risks becoming fragmented or reinforcing existing beliefs. By identifying priority audiences, defining emergent narratives, and developing shared message pillars, we are seeing the importance of anchoring storytelling in a common framework so that stories, across different platforms and messengers, collectively reinforce a consistent shift over time.

# 5.

## MOVING FORWARDS

Over the last two years, CRIF, CRVPF, IRIS and Purposeful have each deepened and strengthened their approach to working with young mothers – refining and redefining what it means to resource, accompany and stand alongside some of the most marginalised girls and young women in Kenya, Mozambique and Tanzania. Through grantmaking that trusts young mothers with real decisions and real money, convenings, and safe spaces that build solidarity within and across borders, and accompaniment rooted in care and healing, the contours of genuine impact are taking shape.

What is emerging is greater than the sum of its parts. It is from this foundation that we continue to move forwards together. Across partners, we are aligning around three areas that none of us can advance alone:

1. Supported by ICRW, we are deepening our **collective learning, evidence generation and documentation**, so what we are witnessing is captured, shared and becomes a global good for other practitioners, policymakers and funders.
2. We are strengthening our **advocacy**, so that the voices and demands of young mothers reach the policymakers, funders and systems that too often exclude them.
3. We are **centring a common set of narratives**, working together to shift away from shame and stigma towards power, dignity and possibility.

The movement being built is nascent, the systems and structures being challenged are deeply entrenched, and the needs of young mothers and their children are urgent – but the direction is clear and young mothers are leading from the front.



### Note on data sources

This brief is informed by our many ways of knowing – a combination of learning documented across monthly calls with anchor groups and partners, routine data collection, learning visits to communities where we sat in conversations with young mothers, and an in-person convening with young mothers, which centred storytelling and deep dialogue.

### Endnotes

1. [Mozambique: Pregnant Students, Adolescent Mothers Leave School](#)
2. [Disturbing rise in teenage pregnancy, child marriage, gender-based violence and HIV infection in adolescent girls in East and Southern Africa – we need to act collectively and with urgency](#)
3. [2022 Demographic and Health Survey Summary Report](#)
4. [Teenage mothers report poor health and economic functioning in Western Kenya: A call to action](#)
5. [INCREASING NEW HIV INFECTIONS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE: A threat to The Realization of Demographic Dividend in Kenya](#)
6. [Factors Associated With Teenage Pregnancy in Tanzania: Analysis of the 2022 Tanzania Demographic and Health Survey and Malaria Indicator Survey](#)
7. [HIV screening and associated factors among adolescent girls and young women in Tanzania: analysis of the 2022 demographic and health survey data](#)

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### CRIF partners

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- Associação Coalizão da Juventude Moçambicana (Coalizao), Mozambique

### CRVPF partners

- Siaya Muungano Network, Kenya
- Siaya Young Women Alliance, Kenya
- Stawisha Africa Initiative, Kenya
- Miss Koch Kenya (MKK), Kenya
- Women United for Social Transformation (WUSTRA), Kenya
- Footprints 4 Change (F4C), Kenya
- Builders of the Future Africa, Kenya
- Little Prospects, Kenya
- Her Journey to School, Kenya
- Thamani Yangu Initiative (TYI), Tanzania
- Sauti ya Jamii Kipunguni, Tanzania
- Help the Child, the Youth and Women Tanzania Foundation (HCYWTF), Tanzania

### IRIS partners

- Docubox

### Purposeful partners

- Imarisha Dada (“Empower a Sister”), Kenya
- Resource Centre for Women and Girls, Kenya
- Young and Alive Initiative, Tanzania

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