

# My Empowerment Journey

*A Teen Girls' Edition*

2023

2022

# Personal Information

This book belongs to:

Date of birth:

  /   /  

Email:

Telephone:

Address:

## In case of emergency:

Name of emergency contact:

Relationship:

Telephone:

Blood group:

Medical  
conditions/  
allergies:

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Notes:



This is your year!

# Calendar 2022

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# Our Youth Focus at FISD



At the Foundation for Innovative Social Development, we believe in the transformational power of youth. Every generation that is born into this world has a renewed opportunity to look back at the actions of previous generations, reflect on lessons learned, and shape the future to one that is inclusive and respectful for all. During our ten years in existence, our organization has worked extensively with youth from across the country and their aspirations and hopes for a better future have constantly pushed us to center and amplify young voices within the work we do. FISD understands that a core part of social development is empowering young girls and boys equipping them with the tools they need to have power and control over their own lives as they navigate teenage years filled with both triumphs and challenges. Empowerment for girls must come with equal opportunities and independence as well as collective efforts to ensure that their freedoms and choices are not hindered due to harmful gender norms that make girls feel unworthy or less important. We also believe in the need to transform masculinities so that men and boys “unlearn” patriarchal values and move towards more caring and violent-free ways of acting, thinking and knowing. Through this journal, it is our hope that the young girls and boys reading this would find the tools they need to transform attitudes regarding gender and learn few valuable lessons needed to take charge of their own lives in a manner that is responsible and accountable to their own selves and to society.

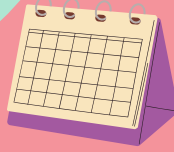
Hello!

Welcome to an awesome two-year empowerment plan made exclusively for brave young girls like you! My name is Olu - like the flower. Just like the Lotus flower, I have experienced rain, storms and harsh winds but also bright sunny days filled with butterflies and rainbows. What I mean to say is, life can be hard sometimes, but all of us have our good days and bad! This is why <enter title> journal is here to help young girls like you navigate the unique challenges we face as we journey through our memorable teenage years.

This journal spans across two years (2022-2023). Every month, the two of us will explore two vital lessons that all brave young girls need to know - from building your confidence to dealing with changes in your body. If you flip towards the end of each year, you will also find five actions to start practising in your daily life. Remember, this journal is supposed to be a fun experience for you to reflect and learn as we bloom together to become your totally powerful self. Whenever you find some free time, this journal will be waiting for you to jot down your thoughts and learnings.

A brand-new year, a brand new you! Are you ready to "bloom"? Let's begin!





## All Brave Young Girls need.. SELF-ESTEEM

Hi friend! Let's begin the year with that one perfect thing that all young girls wish they had... self-esteem! Ever had moments where you looked at another woman and thought... "wow, looks like she naturally has the gift of being able to love herself probably because of amazing parents, perfect childhoods, or lucky genes"? Guess what - the fact that anyone can love themselves by birth or easily is a completely wrong assumption. In fact, did you know that some of the happiest people I know have had to go through a series of interactions, challenges, and triumphs in order to feel content with themselves? As a teen with low self-esteem, I can tell you that it was only when I started seeing setbacks as opportunities for growth that I really started loving myself. Self-esteem truly is the secret ingredient behind success and empowerment, which is exactly why we've dedicated the first three months of this journal for this theme! Every time you take care of yourself by putting your wellbeing first, interacting with new people, understanding your strengths and weaknesses, and experimenting with new things... the more self-esteem you develop. It also means questioning this girl box that us girls are trapped inside. This girl box is society's imaginary "cage" that includes all the silly expectations and rules that society unfairly places on girls... such as having to limit our freedom, opportunities, and choices because girls are apparently "supposed to" act, talk, behave, and even dress a certain way in order to be accepted. These silly rules are a result of this concept called the "patriarchy" - a culture where masculinity is seen as more superior over femininity. Patriarchy has existed for a long time where women had to fight very hard to gain basic rights such as to vote, go to work and even run for elections. I know, sounds strange right? After all, our skills, dreams and opportunities should not be limited because of gender or any other identity for that matter. So, over the next two years, I invite you to join me as we gradually step out of the girl box and thrive as the brave young girls that we are!





## January | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like...

## HAVING CONFIDENCE

When you're young, it's easy to feel like, those around you as well as your body, is always expecting /forcing you to "be the perfect girl ." The 'girl box' we have always been given doesn't include ways to build confidence, but suggest we limit our behaviors and expressions and allow it to be controlled by others. The framings around shame and fear that girls have to live put so much pressure on our free expressions. This pressure to be perfect can mess with our confidence and feeling of self-worth. For example, I used to feel like I had no confidence to make new friends, speak in front of a big group or to even dress fashionably or even say "no" to what I didn't like or for things that made me uncomfortable . For a long time, I used to think that only successful people are confident, that only some people get it by birth, and that people who always looked confident have no insecurities. But this all turned out to be false. Truth is, nobody is born with confidence - it's something everyone has to work for and develop as we grow. Building confidence can be as simple as changing our body language ( the way we react to things and people ) to trying out things you never thought you could do!

Remember that confidence is not always about being the loudest person in the room. It is possible to have insecurities and bad days while still maintaining your confidence. The goal is to keep moving forward despite these setbacks. If we are to do this, stepping outside the 'girl box' is required. Let's read more stories of girls who have stepped out and built their confidence. Have you heard terms like "strong is the new pretty" or "No means No"? What could be your terms to express your confidence story?







## January | Week 3-4

# Empowerment looks like...

## BUILDING MY IDENTITY

Time for a funny story. Recently, someone asked me "Olu, who are you?" and guess what - although this sounded like a simple question, I struggled to answer! That's because someone's identity is so complicated and layered. We have different identities as a daughter, student, granddaughter, and friend, for example. All these identities combined makes each of us unique. Think about it, if all of us thought, behaved, dressed and looked the same - this world would be so boring, wouldn't it?

There is a high likelihood for our identity to be shaped by how others, such as family, teachers and friends, see us. Sometimes, you may also feel pressure to confine your identity to certain stereotypes or expectations placed by society on your background, gender, religion ethnicity, your area of residence or even disability. These stereotypes can be harmful because it places people in boxes that limit our diverse and unique identities. However, keep in mind that your identity is entirely up to you and it's okay to take all the time you need to find your true self based on what is close to your heart and mind. This year, I hope you take the time to explore and reflect on yourself so that someday, you can be happy to say "this is who I am!"





## February | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like... HAVING TALENT AND SKILL

Did you know that one of the secrets to building your self-esteem is by recognizing your own unique talents and skills? This helps you understand what makes you unique and help you achieve more. If we only see us in the "girl box" with limited socially expected traditional skills for a girl such as cooking, cleaning, dressmaking and maybe caring for other we will not see us beyond that, we will not train ourselves to broaden our limits and explore new skills.

Let me tell you a story, I had a friend called Fathima who was really good at telling compelling stories using clay. She would mould tiny characters and settings and make videos showcasing them to convey powerful messages. But Fathima always thought she was not good enough, or not as good as Shehan at least. Shehan was another classmate who won First Prize at the Young Scientist Competition every year. Just last week, Fathima was telling me how she could not have been more wrong. By comparing her talent to Shehan's, she had forgotten to her own value. Now, both Fathima and Shehan are successful persons in their own unique fields. While Fathima runs a successful marketing agency by using storytelling and clay as her unique product, Shehan was appointed as the deputy leader of his university's science fair.

My point is, our strengths and talents can be so diverse and unique and it does not have to be limited by silly social rules such as 'girly' or 'boyish' or "good/bad" skills. Also, do not worry if you feel you have not discovered yours yet. Some of the most successful people I know discovered their talents much later after experimenting with many different things. So let's start by figuring out what makes you happy and what activities are you able to do easily or with little bit of effort. Then, the key is to keep improving by practising and using your talent regularly. also keeping in mind that you should not give up on them when you pass through different stages of your life cycle. I have seen how girls giving up when they get married, have kids and just become dependents. So let your talents and skills makes you an independent girl and allow you to make the best life choices for you!





Have you come across girls who have not yet explored their real talents or anyone who had given up on their talents?

Use this space to create few uplifting messages to share with such others. What are some of own talents that you have recognized? What messages you have for yourself?

## February | Week 3-4

# Empowerment looks like...

## LOVING MY OWN BODY (PART 1)

Now, we turn to "body image" - which refers to how we look at our own bodies and how attractive we feel in it. I know that myself and a lot of my other classmates had low self-esteem growing up because we did not feel happy with the way we looked because it didn't fit in with the "girl box" we have been introduced to. Again, just like some of the other topics we discussed, this dissatisfaction with our bodies has a lot to do with the silly social rules that impose what 'perfect' bodies are supposed to look like. But guess what? There is no such thing as a perfect body. You're probably thinking, "but Olu, how about flat bellies, long straight hair and flawless skin?" That's because, often, what we see on magazines, television Instagram or Facebook are just one body type among a whole other range of bodies. It's unfair to compare our different shapes and sizes to the supermodels or photoshopped figures that we see on media. Our bodies are made differently and there's no such thing as a "good" or "bad" body. I am going to let you on another self-esteem secret: your weight, for example, is only way to measure health. There's also our intelligence, our nutrition levels, exercise and how much sleep you get, that all equally count to feeling and being attractive and having a positive self-image.

So this week, let's reflect on these questions: who actually benefits from being negative about my body? What's something I love about my body? What are some body positive messages I can share with my friends?







## March | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like...

## LOVING MY OWN BODY (PART 2)

Now, I know that young girls like you, no matter how brave and beautiful you are, frequently struggle to be happy with our bodies. This is why I am including two more sections to loving our bodies. Increasing your body positivity, has to do with maintaining an overall healthy lifestyle but also being brave enough to challenge the harmful messages society tells us and given to you in the same 'girl box'. For example, I used to think that people will like me more if I was thin, but as I grew up I found true friends who valued who I was as a whole person instead of judging me by my appearance only. So it was more about finding the right friends and community and be brave enough to express our true feelings rather than punishing my body to be liked by others.

That being said, young girls have every right to exercise, eat healthy and put on make-up to look beautiful - which is awesome! But let's not go to drastic measures to bow down to society's unrealistic and unfair beauty rules. So ask yourself: if my body could talk right now, what would it say? If it happy with the way you've been treating it or does it feel punished? This year, let's start giving permission to love and take care of our own bodies because we are born beautiful and society is not going to convince us that we are not.

I will follow some self-care routines to look after my body and my looks, not only from outside but also from the inside!

1. Daily yoga
2. A walk a day
3. Early to bed and early to rise
4. Drink enough water
5. Reduce instant food

Would you like to add more and maybe share some self care tips with your friends too?





March | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like... LOVING MY OWN BODY (PART 3)

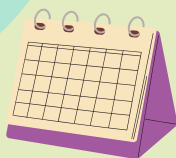
One more thing to remember before we wrap up this subject - most unfair beauty standards come from the media we consume, like advertisements, movies, and films as well as from our peers and family. So, it's no surprise that a lot of young girls like you worry about their bodies and appearance. Most of us have at least few experiences being teased by our peers; told we've gained too much or lost a lot of weight or felt bad about your skin when watching supermodels on TV on those skin commercials. Trust me, you are not alone. As teen girls, we often internalize these harmful messages leading to dissatisfaction with our perfectly normal bodies and low self-esteem. Want to know a secret? Hating your body is unhealthy motivation and I know people who have tried hard to have the 'perfect' body but are still unhappy or dissatisfied.

So this month, let's reflect on this question: what's something that makes me feel worse about my body? It could be magazines, Instagram, keeping a scale at home - whatever it is, let's try to reduce using them and see if it makes a difference.

If you still feel like you need to take a brave step and try out something new for you- like trying a new hair cut during school holidays or find a new unique dress style that makes you happy - it could be worth convincing your parents!







## All Brave Young Girls need.. EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

We're already four months into 2022! It's great to see how far you have come, the lessons you've learned and how much you've grown. Over the next three months, let's explore the important of our emotional wellbeing as young girls. All brave young girls need emotional wellbeing in order to succeed, considering the emotional and physical changes you experience during these crucial years. I for example found that my emotional wellbeing was being challenged as I tried to fit in at school, excel at sports while balancing tuition classes and even when trying to be a good daughter in my parents' eyes. When I realized that my peers experience the same challenges, suddenly I did not feel so alone. In Sri Lanka, we know that maintaining our emotional wellbeing inside the "girl box" that we are placed in, can be challenging. Some people think that our mental health is not so important as physical health, but truth is they are both more connected than we realize. Ever had a strange stomach-ache the day before an exam or that headache you get whenever you worry about something? Exactly. Sometimes, people think that our mental health needs to be really bad to go to a counsellor to speak with a loved one - but that is wrong. Our emotional wellbeing depends on our ability to be open, seek help when needed and not feel ashamed to be honest with our feelings.

Like our physical wellbeing, our emotional health has many parts, so let's learn about some of them as we continue on this journey of growth.



April | Week 1-2

## Empowerment looks like... BEING IN TOUCH WITH MY EMOTIONS

Being a teenager can sometimes feel like a rollercoaster ride, right? Sometimes, we feel excited, and next it's sadness, anger or irritation. Sometimes, people try to define us as moody, fussy teenagers with attitudes - but I don't think that's fair to say. What do you think? The truth is, teenagers have to go through so many big changes in their lives, from hormonal changes in your body, to the ways people see you and even how they position you in the society as a girl, in most cases in a very vulnerable, subordinated position, sometimes discriminating you for the same reason of being a girl. All these factors can lead to an "achcharu" of emotions. . And most importantly to protect yourself from the feelings of guilt since you are not to be blamed for social construction of the 'girl box' which leads to some of these confusing identities. It's important that you take all the time you need to recognize, validate and manage our emotions. For example, whenever I feel angry, I try to understand what's making me feel this way. Because anger is sometimes a defence mechanism, we use to cover up other emotions and stressors like sadness, rejection or criticism. It's important to remind yourself that we all need to give permission to "feel" things and that all our emotions are valid, even the ones that make us uncomfortable.

Here's a good reflective activity:

Try listing some feelings that make you uncomfortable. As an extra step, we can discuss with close friends about the different ways we could use to manage them - a perfect way to create a sense of collective care and collective power!





April | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like... MANAGING INTENSE EMOTIONS

Want to know something else that society includes inside our "girl box"? That all teen girls are always moody and irritable. While this is not entirely wrong, it does not mean we are "always" like this. In fact, being having strong emotions as a young girl is very common and normal - considering the pressures we have to face while being inside this "girl box." When emotions like extreme sadness, anger or even other emotions that we experience due to love is felt...it can even be a good thing. While emotions like anger help us identify our triggers, others like sadness helps us identify what matters most to us and which factors get in the way of our happiness. These strong emotions can even happen all at once. For example, having an argument with a parent, breaking up with a person you really liked your lover or even grieving the death of a loved one due to a tragic circumstance, for instance, may make you feel angry, sad, and confused at the same time. That's because intense emotions that make us feel down can often come out as a result of love. When some of these circumstances occur, it may happen because of a loved one doing something unexpected, or that interferes with the love you share with them. This can make us feel betrayed, lonely, or invalidated, which can result in these intense emotions disrupting our daily routines. So whenever you feel overwhelmed, and unable to do your daily tasks as usual, it's a sign that you need a mental health break. This does not mean that you ignore or dismiss your feelings, but rather take the time to validate how you feel and identify triggers that contribute to intense emotions. Let me also highlight here something that most girls do when they have these feelings is to respond impulsively which can lead to self-harm. I am sure you have already come across news of girls harming their own life as a way to end some of the strong feelings. Remember emotions are mostly short lived, you just need to work it out with little bit of support. Life is so valuable once you take control of your own life. This journal will take you through that journey of taking that control and making correct life choices.

This week, I invite you to reflect more on how your intense emotions are valid (and normal!!) and can be managed by understanding the connections between how you think, feel and act. Because we need to challenge the assumption that by ignoring it, or by crying it out as we usually do, our feelings will go away. Next time you feel these intense emotions, let's try to figure out what makes you feel this way. For example, I feel angry or impatient whenever I am tired after school, when I'm hungry or when there is a sudden change to my usual routine. Sometimes, I have reacted by being rude to my parents, and yelling. But now, I try to manage it by making sure I get some rest when I am tired or being alone and reading a book. Your reasons and reactions for anger might not be the same, but they are valid too.





May | Week 1-2

## Empowerment looks like... FEELING LESS ANXIOUS AND FATIGUE

Most of my friends think that anxiety is not a big deal. But for me, my anxious thoughts always interfered with my school and daily life and in figuring out who I really am. Because I knew most of my friends felt the same way, I thought it wasn't necessary to make a big deal of it or seek help when needed. But I was wrong. If you have feelings of impending doom, trouble concentrating at school, less interest on your own life and in being with your friends or even repeated stomach aches or headaches, it is very likely that you feel anxious. Just because anxiety is common among young girls like you, it does not mean that can dismiss it. In the long run, expressing how you and connecting with others and with nature as well as focusing on the good things can really help lessen anxiety. Another trick that I use whenever I feel anxious is the 3-3-3 rule; I name three things I can see, then listen, and then listen. This rule has helped me return to the present moment and detangle my anxious thoughts.

Another mental state that can make us feel uncomfortable is extreme tiredness, which we sometimes call fatigue. I am sure most of us, including you, have felt this now more than even in the middle of this COVID-19 pandemic. It's normal for us to feel low on energy and even hopeless sometimes, because these lockdowns and restrictions are also getting in the way of hanging out with friends and having fun. Even before Covid, it's fair to say that teen girls have to deal with so many pressures that arise due to the "girl box" expectations that fatigue unfortunately can become a normal part of our lives. Although feeling tired is normal and happens to everybody, teen girls especially need to take care of their bodies, identify patterns of tiredness, and find ways to practice good physical and emotional wellbeing.



Sometimes, we might feel tired even when we haven't been physically active. This is because of mental strains caused due to several reasons, but especially due to the unique pressures that society places on girl like you to "be perfect" and "act like a girl." This can leave us feeling confused, low and rejected - and you're not alone in feeling that way. Identify what causes your fatigue and let's begin to question whether this "girl box" is worth risking your mental wellbeing for.

If you feel that you need to talk to someone, find someone you trust or contact a mental health professional to help understand your feelings and address it. remember that it's perfectly okay to seek help or talk to someone even on your good days, instead of waiting till your anxiety becomes uncontrollable. With fatigue, I find that having a regular sleeping pattern, taking breaks, and eating healthy can help a lot - something you can try too!



May | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like... BEING SELF-AWARE

Hello! This month we're going to build on this quote by Socrates, who famously said: "to know yourself is the beginning of wisdom." Self-awareness is a word you may have heard before, but what does this actually mean? A person who is self-aware is able to accurately recognize their emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence their behavior. Some of the most successful people I know are very self-aware and you should definitely work on this skill as part of your journey to being a brave, confident and beautiful young girl. Basically, self-awareness helps us understand our mistakes, learn from them and regularly evaluate our thoughts and actions. I know, sometimes society does not like it when we take time for ourselves because of the false notion that taking time for yourself, is selfish. Sometimes, we can have personal biases too- such as assuming that getting to know ourselves is boring or uninteresting and we put more time in understanding people around us. But in fact, being able to recognize your own strengths, limitations, emotions and behaviours is one of the first steps to being confident in your own skin. And self-awareness can really help you be fair to your unique needs, find out what truly makes "you" happy and what you need to avoid triggers that make you feel bad. For example, try listing down a few things you like about yourself and a few others that you need to work on - and you're already on your way to being self-aware!

Don't be afraid to get to know you well. It will definitely be an adventurous journey to understand how much you have grown this year compared to last year and that growth is always progressive. Would you like to note down new findings about your own self, or even the things that you left behind because they affect your progressive growth?





June | Week 1-2

## Empowerment looks like... MANAGING MY STRESS LEVELS

As young girls when we come across risky, uncertain or difficult situations, experiencing stress is a common feature. Have you ever had days where that headache does not seem to go away, you find that you either eating too much or too little, and overall feel less energetic? All these signs indicate that you might be stressed. Being inside this "girl box," you may feel pressure from things you see on social media, to not fitting in at school, to living up to society's expectations of you as a "good daughter," and student. Even the bravest of girls have to deal with so many things at the same time, as I am sure you feel that way sometimes too. Often, when compared to boys your age - girls have the double burden of living up to social rules that tell us to fit in to a "feminine" frame such as to be kind and sensitive, while also achieving good grades, helping with housework, while also looking pretty "and" caring to everyone around us and to tolerate things and people as much as possible, no matter how much it affects us negatively. . That's a very heavy expectation that society places on young girls like us, isn't it? It's also not very fair.

Whenever I feel stressed, I sometimes convince myself that stress happens because I am growing and changing. Sometimes, I find that a little bit of stress isn't always bad- for example, whenever I have exams and I talk about my stress with Amma, she tells me that this feeling of discomfort to perform well is a sign that I am taking my education seriously and that I care about my life goals . Amma's words really helped me understand more about stress; that it can be good sometimes but it is also (often) bad for you if it means that you have no opportunity to actually stop, rest, take care of yourself and then resume. So, I think it's better to learn to manage our stress levels because no human can be completely stress-free.







June | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like... BEING POSITIVE

Wow, look at the time pass by. We've already reached the middle of the year and I am so happy to see you grow and face challenges with a brave face on, and slowly climbing out of the "girl box" placed by society. Now, let's end June with a promise to ourselves: to be more positive whenever we can. I know- it sounds so cliché, right? The reason you hear this from our teachers, parents and mentors so often because the benefits of a positive outlook is a secret behind many successful people out there. So it's not surprise that you've heard it so many times! Positive thinkers are often resilient, and optimistic. But they also know that positive thinking does not always mean that anything negative is bad. Did I confuse you? Let me explain!

Last couple of weeks, we explored why young girls like you have to deal with stress and anxiety because of the unfair social rules that expect girls to act, dress, talk and behave a certain way. Having learned this, young girls are able to relax and refocus certain information that consume by changing the way they understand it. Positivity can look a lot like, enjoying new unexpected plans even though it was changed suddenly or laughing at a commercial that spreads harmful messages like "all girls need to be fair" or commenting on a Facebook post which blames girls for expressing their true emotions" It can also look a lot like responding to an angry tone by smiling instead of responding back in anger. Personally, I try to be positive by looking forward instead of looking backwards at my mistakes and failures, because no one benefits from crying over our regrets. I have also turned my negative self-talk to positive ones like changing "Olu, you're fat and nobody will like you" to "By being myself, I will attract the right friends who do not judge me by my weight, Olu." Having said this, remember that as humans it is impossible for us to be positive all the time. So, while you try to reframe and see things in a positive light, remember that it's ok and normal to feel negative sometimes.







## All Brave Young Girls need.. SOCIAL WELLBEING

It's already July! Look at how far you've come, friend! I am really proud of you for pulling through seven months by handling both the good and the bad with a brave face on. I'm excited to know more about your growth journey and your attempts to step outside the "girl box." So, over the next three months, I want to help you understand the social needs of brave young girls like you! Social wellbeing refers to our need for healthy relationships and social connections while also maintaining a sense of independence as well as freedom, enjoyment and most importantly - that warm feeling of belonging that all of us can appreciate.

My social needs might be completely different from yours. For example, I feel more comfortable when I am in a smaller group of friends or family because that's what helps me open up and have fun. I also interact with others better in closed social settings such as a dinner or quiet gathering. But I know some friends who prefer to be part of larger groups instead, prefer parties and loud music and has no problem making new friends. It doesn't mean that either of us are 'cooler' than the other - but instead shows that we all have different ways of ensuring our social wellbeing and feel connected rather than suffer in isolation. But the important thing is to always find ways to interact in society, because human beings by nature do not do well when we are completely isolated all the time.



## July | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like... SURVIVING PEER PRESSURE

I remember in grade 08, I was sitting with my clique during interval period when Sachini, one of my friends started complaining about the new girl who joined that year. "Apo, did you see how she was dressed at the carnival? Haha I actually thought she was a boy, wearing loose pants and that silly boy cut hairstyle of hers... she must be one of those types," she said as all of us started laughing. For some reasons, deep inside I knew that we are cornering her more by dissing her like this, but it felt good to laugh and make fun of someone as a group. After all, I don't want to be labelled as the "boring one who cannot take a joke" right? This feeling of doing something you wouldn't normally do just so you can fit in a friend group - is called peer pressure; something that all young girls and women even boys have to deal with as we grow and another part of society's need to put girls like you into this silly "girl's box" that we spoke of earlier. Inside this girl box, you may have felt that you are "supposed" to act, talk, behave and dress "like a girl" This feeling of pressure to stick to these girly stereotypes first comes from our family (i.e. getting pink toys and kitchen set to play) and then eventually from our peers (i.e. being called tomboy for taking karate class instead of dance class). This kind of pressure to limit our interests, choices and behaviour to our stereotypical gender expectations is bad, because truth is, there is no wrong way to be a girl. Girls can be anything they want to be, and it's unfair to limit our vast horizons of opportunities because of social pressure.

As a young girl, it's tough to resist peer pressure because it feels good to be part of a closed group and to be seen as 'cool.' But if it goes against your personal values as a young girl, maybe it's time to be brave enough to let go of negative peer groups. This might be easy once you realize that peer pressure can sometimes be a good thing. For example, if your friends constantly push you to get good marks at the exam or talk about joining the chess club together, this is called positive peer pressure where you and your friends grow together in a way that is respectful to all or when your friends tries to challenge a social myth that you have been pushed to believe all your life - I mean things like your misconceptions of boys where you also look at boys from a "man box" lens and acknowledge all harmful masculinities they perform within that 'man box.'.





July | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like... FINDING THE RIGHT FRIENDS

I am sure you will agree when I say that one of the most awesome things about being a young girl is the beautiful and close friendships that we form during our teenage years. When I was a kid, my parents always picked my friends for me, but as I grew more independent, I started to pick friends that I like to hang out with. I thought the more friends I have, the more "cool" I will be and that true friends never let us down. As much as I hope that this is true, we have to know the important of choosing the right friends and understand that just like you and me, our friends may make mistakes from time to time as well. This is because the friends that we select can influence each other and even determine our health, happiness and own confidence levels. Having our own girl group can be so awesome, because we have someone to share our stress, problems and even our happy moments with! But sometimes, if we are a part of a group that promotes negative peer pressure like we discussed earlier (bullying others together, teasing someone because of their looks, etc), it can lower our self-esteem and affect our emotional wellbeing too. Another reminder - our friends doesn't always have to be made up of girls. Boys can be good friends too if we understand each other, respect each other and know what we want from friendship.

So here's a question to reflect on, so we know how to find the right friends.. ask yourself: what kind of qualities am I looking for in a friend? This can range from honesty (I expect a good friend to tell me the truth), shared interests, attentive (they know when I am sad, need support, or are happy), and even forgiving (they are ready to learn from mistakes and accept us despite our weaknesses) and most importantly respect for each other.





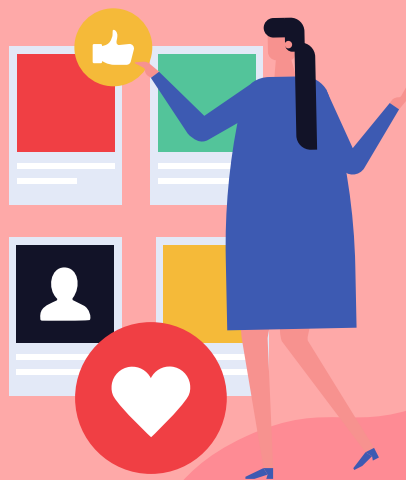


## August | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like... BEING SMART ABOUT STRANGERS

At school, most of my friends were scared to talk to strangers because their parents warned them not to. But as we grow older, we realize that people who can or do harm us can be both people we know as well as strangers. In the "girl box" that society puts us into, young girls like you are "supposed" be shy and prim and proper, isn't it? By being inside this "girl box" how can girls expect to be smart about strangers, it can be difficult unless we step out of it. Sometimes, you may be interested to broaden your horizons, meet new people, and expand your social circle, which enhances your social wellbeing. But because of social rules, you may feel that people will blame you because of silly "girl box" labels like "girls should not speak to strangers, or they will get hurt," or "a proper girl must always be polite and pleasant." These rules stem from the incorrect assumption that girls are weak and need protection from strangers. But do you know that harassment and other types of malicious activities directed to girls are sometimes committed by people they know as much as strangers? This is why brave girls opt to "be smart" about strangers rather than avoiding them completely.

Now I already know you're smart - so I get a feeling you already know the answer to this one. Yes - you are smart enough to be "smart" about strangers simply by RELYING ON YOUR GUT FEELING. If something doesn't feel right, don't do it. Remember that a stranger who does not pose danger will respect your personal space and avoid inappropriate conversations/remarks. Harmful people cannot be judged by their appearance, so keep in mind that we need to be cautious about any stranger we meet, while trusting our gut instincts. If a stranger makes you uncomfortable, do not worry about being impolite or hurting their feelings, try to remove yourself from the situation and seek support from an adult you trust.





## August | Week 3-4

# Empowerment looks like...

## BEING EMPATHETIC

Empathy - the ability to understand and be sensitive to the feelings and experiences of others. From all the skills out there, empathy is one of the most important social skills that any young girl must strive to build; it makes you look 'cool', helps you get more friends and even boosts your own self-esteem. As young girls, society expects us to be nurturing and empathetic - probably one of the good things that society expects us to be, apart from most of the irrelevant ones we explored earlier. Even though only girls are expected to be empathetic, imagine how peaceful society would be, if boys were held up to this same expectation too. Because truth is, empathy is a skill that both boys and girls need to build as human beings regardless of our gender. Let me tell you a great way to understand empathy. Imagine a transparent bottle of water filled with glitter in it. Now, suppose you shake the bottle violently. What happened? Now, imagine that you stopped shaking the bottle and kept it on a flat surface to rest. What happens to the glitter? It very slowly and steadily starts to sink to the bottom and eventually exhibits a calm appearance, doesn't it. Your thought and emotions are a lot like this glitter filled bottle. Due to the pressures of staying inside the "girl box" we often have to deal with many conflicting emotions, some good while some not so good. So, empathy has a lot to do with understanding that others' emotions and experiences are similarly contextual and imperfect. It's also about realizing that those emotions may look and feel differently in other people.

Empathy can look a lot like supporting your team members even when they fail to do something, being there for your friend when she is going through a tough time and being friendly and welcoming to the new student in your class. So this week, I want you to try and walk in someone else's shoes and seek our ways to be empathetic to others - it truly is a superpower and recipe for growth.

Can you recall situations where you offered support and stand on your friend's side? Don't forget that empathizing also means being non-judgmental. We as girls, sometimes criticize other girls based on the 'girl box' specially when other girls do not adhere to the definitions of girl box, knowing exactly how we ourselves are negatively impacted by the same. Can you recall times where you were judgmental and didn't offer support?





## September | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like...

## EMBRACING DIVERSITY

You know what, friend... we are so lucky to be living in a country like Sri Lanka – our diversity makes our culture so rich and vibrant. But sometimes, when bad things happen, like when we hear about some riots, or unfair arrests... it can be very confusing and distressing, no matter how brave we are. These terrible events that you hear about are the result of people being treated unfairly because of their ethnicity, religion, social background or even who they choose to love. It is a kind of discrimination, and it is harmful to people. Our beautiful island has so many different ethnicities, languages, religions and even persons with different gender identities and sexual orientations. They all have the same human rights as we do, to live a dignified life.

You may have heard people defining our culture as one big achcharuwa. For example, for an achcharu to be tasty, you need a variety of vegetables, date fruit, chillies, mustard seeds, ginger, and even sugar. These are tossed around and mixed – but each ingredient retains its own distinct identity! No better way to describe the beauty of our motherland – all diverse people can mingle together while everyone recognizes and celebrates each other's' cultures and identities. Personally, I was able to embrace diversity by making friends from other cultures and backgrounds. For example, I had no idea that my friend Fathima and I had so many similarities until we started tuition together. Now, we really enjoy volunteering for community service projects and her friendship has been such a strength to me. You too can learn to embrace diversity by making friend outside your background, taking the time to learn about different cultures, religions and genders, for example. Ask yourself: "have I put places unfair labels on someone I know without taking the time to truly know them? / Have I taken time to appreciate someone I know who doesn't confirm to stereotypes?"





## September | Week 3-4

# Empowerment looks like...

## RESISTING BULLYING

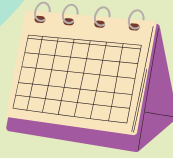
Unfortunately, no matter what kind of background we have or the types of lives we lead, bullying is something every young girl has experienced in one or more of three forms; we've either been the bully, have been bullied, or stood by as a bystander while bullying took place around us. Our journey to true empowerment would not be complete if we do not make conscious efforts to challenge bullying, usually understood as any form of unwanted, aggressive behaviour that occurs because of a real or assumed imbalance in power between two people or groups. It's easy to dismiss small incidents of bullying because society tells that bullying among teenagers is "not so serious", as far as it doesn't cause any harm to the other person. But if these incidents keep happening without anyone taking action against it, we indirectly support an entire "culture" of bullying that creates low self-esteem and poor mental and physical health and even loss of life to those being bullied, let alone an environment without respect for one another.

Remember the topic of "peer pressure" we learned explored earlier? Bullies often come in cliques of friends who support each other's harmful behaviour due to jealousy, or in a search to gain more power in a relationship. Do any of these sound familiar... backbiting, ostracizing, rumour spreading and name-calling? They are all different forms of bullying that most of us are unfortunately all too familiar with. In the age we live in, brave young girls like you must also remember that bullying isn't limited to the classroom, it can pop up in social media and other online spaces too. Bullies are often discouraged by people who seem confident, are assertive - so that's my tip for you this week. And more importantly, don't ignore incidents of bullying when you see it, speak up and always try to be there on behalf of anyone being bullied... because that's going to be a milestone of your incredible empowerment journey!









## All Brave Young Girls need.. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Our journey to empowerment has been an incredible one so far – what do you think? We've reached the final three months for 2022 and I am so happy to see you how much you've bloomed! I am sure the past year has been far from easy but give yourself a pat on the back for bracing through these months despite the many things that tried to hold you back – yes, even the small ones! Over the next three months, I am going to help you learn more about how brave young girls can communicate and express themselves more effectively. Because society places us all into this very oppressive "girl box" you and I are told to be prim and proper, shy, "decent" and always polite. I have noticed that whenever a boy is assertive and shows good leadership qualities, he is called a "leader." But when a girl shows the same qualities, society tends to label her as "bossy", or even call names such as "mara kella" or "baduwa" which could be very demeaning. If a girl steps outside the boundaries of this girl box, they face more harsher consequences than boys and are told that "she should know her place" or "learn to act like a lady."

But all brave girls need to step outside this girl box to live a fuller and richer life, by saying goodbye to some of the nonsensical social rules that people try to impose on us to limit our freedom. In order for you to do so, you need to learn how communication and expression is a main part of being unafraid and unapologetic about your needs, interests, and views. With the right tools for communication, brave young girls can build better relationships with their friends, family, and community as well as solve problems intelligently. Are you ready?



## October | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like...

## EXPRESSING HOW I FEEL

An important part of growing up into a confident girl is improving your ability to share your feelings, thoughts and perspectives when necessary. If you ask me, I've tried to hide my feelings and thoughts most of the time because society tells us that it's not proper for a girl to share feelings openly with anyone. As I grew up, I realized that this social expectation makes no sense at all. Everyone deserves to have the freedom to be able to express ourselves, as long as it's done in the right way. In fact, it has really helped me approach my inner thoughts in a more mature and self-assured way and help me cope better when I am upset. Now, you might ask, "but Olu, sometimes I can't express myself because I don't know how I feel in the first place." Or "I don't want others to worry about me" and "people might also think I am easy going if I express my feelings" - these concerns are all valid. I understand that in order to express yourself, you need to first understand what you're feeling so try to take some time for yourself and try to identify your true emotions (i.e., I feel angry, rejected, lonely, happy, elated, unbothered, etc - it could be more than of these things!) Eventually, I encourage you to take up the courage to take the first step by expressing them to others as relevant. Some ways that you can start is by saying "I feel \_\_\_\_ when/about \_\_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_" I remember expressing my feelings to a classmate recently who was always commenting about acne. Although I knew she was saying it out of concern, I felt irritated by it. So one day, I decided to share what I feel at a time when we both in a good mood by saying "Thanks for your concern about my acne. But I feel irritated when you comment about my skin all the time, because I am trying my best to take care of it but it is challenging because of the hormonal changes that I have." Immediately after, I felt so much better - almost as if a heavy weight had been lifted from me. See how that works? In fact, my best friend Piyumi, has another awesome method she used for expression - since she is relatively shy, Piyumi also draws, writes and journal whenever she has to communicate a heavier topic. Trust me, consider giving it a try!



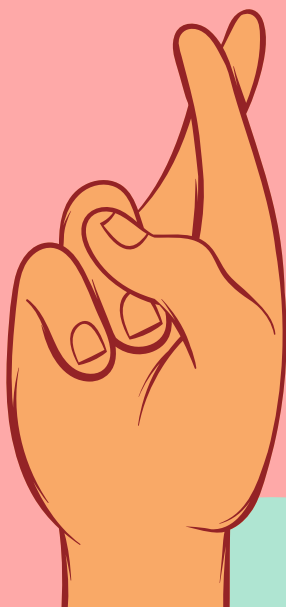


October | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like...

### BEING HONEST

It can be challenging for young girls like yourself to be open and honest because it's natural to be worried about the consequences. Sometimes, it's easy to get away with a tricky situation by lying or twisting the truth. But one moment can become a habit and if lying and dishonesty becomes a daily characteristic, it reflects badly on our character and the levels of trust between yourself and others. By making honesty an important part of your personality, people are bound to see you in a positive light as a loyal, trustworthy, and mature young girl! In fact, when I think of the word "honesty," I remember my sister Saku whenever I think of the word "honesty" because she is the perfect example for it! Saku is so brave that she is never afraid to admit it when she is wrong or makes a mistake. She can be proud of her grades because she has never cheated at exams, and I can always depend on her to tell me if I am upsetting her because she has always been open about her feelings with me. Probably the best thing I love about her honesty is that she always challenges sexist remarks that her friends say, from why women deserve to walk on the road without being cat-called to the need to how feminism is actually about equality among all genders, rather than anti-men ideology - she has always been honest about sharing the truth. So anyway, I feel that I also need to let you know that it's easy to feel like you are not ready to be truly honest, because let's face it - it's not the easier thing to do. But remind yourself of the benefits that honesty can bring and let's end this year on a brave note by being true to our own selves and others. Practise makes perfect - you can do it! Don't forget, this includes being true to your own self as well.





November | Week 1-2

## Empowerment looks like...

### ACTIVE LISTENING

So far, we've explored a few areas of communication that involves having a say. But did you know that another important marker of effective communication is to be a good listener? That's right, this thing we call "active listening" is a habit of sincerely listening and responding to someone else in a way that promotes mutual understanding. This can look a lot like giving them your full attention, signalling that you understand what the other person is saying, using non-verbal signs like nodding, smiling and maintaining eye contact as well as showing that you care by saying things like "I understand," "please continue", " can you tell me more about..." and so forth. I am sure you will agree that listening to someone else, especially when they are expressing their feelings, can be challenging because as a listener you may feel that you need to provide solutions to their problems or give the right answers. But you'll be relieved to know that just by listening alone, you are showing your respect and concern to the speaker, because all of us need a listening ear to share how we feel and think about certain things. Even though you may not have all the answers, active listening is all about avoiding judgement, showing concern and being there for someone when they need it. It's one of the best ways to be a good friend, daughter, and student! You will also understand that it gives us girls collective power.





November | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like... USING SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSIBLY (PART 1)

That's right! Being an empowered young girl in our digital age also means that our choices and actions can be influenced by social media – a space, if used the right way, can be a great tool of empowerment, learning, and connection for young girls like you. I mean let's face it, some of us have already scrolled through our Facebook or Instagram at least once before we even brush our teeth or get ready for school. It's become a central part of our lives and the ways we communicate. Now, don't get upset that you don't have a phone or that your parents have limited your access to internet. Let's not forget that social media at very young age can be very distracting to your educational goals and there could be a huge iceberg of knowledge and information that is not visible to you to make the correct decision or do the proper response in social media. So avoiding social media as much as possible at our age could be very wise.

But if you do have access, remember those "girl box" rules that we spoke to earlier, where social rules expect girls to dress, talk and act a certain way? This applies to online spaces as much as real-life. I know, it's silly, isn't it? Us girls are so diverse in our interests, our looks, fashion, opinions and even styles of expression – but it's strange that society expects us all to behave a certain way so that we can conveniently be fit into their "girl box." Unfortunately, the moment a girl steps outside this girl box of society's expectations, she is cyber-bullied, teased, and called names. Sometimes, stranger on the internet may try to trick young girls to steal private information about you, scam or trick them and exploit young girls for reasons for sexual reasons. This can all sound like the internet is a scary place. But truth is, it's a very vast space of people just like you and me but also has bad people who use their anonymity to prey on others. This also means that the internet can be a good place too, depending on how we use it. It's a great space to connect meaningfully with others, express our views and thoughts, seek support online, and even help with your schoolwork. But sometimes, no matter how responsible you and I are, we can still come across disturbing or harmful content that can make us feel uncomfortable. As a responsible internet user, let's try to always confide in a trusted adult when you have a bad online experience, ensure that your safety comes first before and to always oppose harmful online behaviour.







## December | Week 1-2

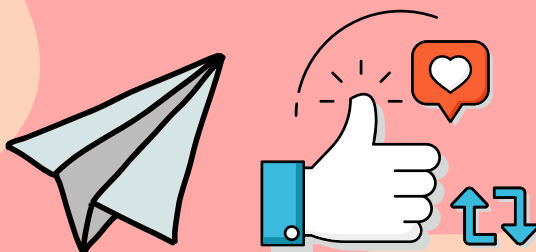
# Empowerment looks like...

## USING SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSIBLY

### (PART 2)

Now I know that teenagers and the internet go together like bread and butter – at times, inseparable! That’s why we need to continue our reflection on responsible social media use this week too! It’s important to be smart about how we use social media, no matter how old you are. Here’s how! Always check your privacy settings to ensure that your personal information (like your address, telephone number, etc.) and private photos are not visible to every stranger who may come across your profile online. We must also be careful about friend requests. While it’s great for us to connect with new people online, but it can be suspicious when strangers on the internet try to send you friend requests when you do not know them in real life. For young girls like you, advice from Olu is to refrain from accepting friend requests from strangers. If you do chat with someone online, remember to never agree to meet them in real life – it’s too dangerous and can put even the smartest of girls in a lot of trouble. And my biggest advice to you, my friend? If someone sends you inappropriate pictures online, you must disconnect immediately and tell an adult you trust. Remember that it’s never your fault if someone makes you unsafe and uncomfortable. For me, the biggest lesson I have learned as a young girl using social media is to always think twice before we post something. The internet is a massive space with complicated technology that you and I need more time to understand. But bottom line is, anything you post online can remain forever even though it can be deleted, through screenshots or other complicated ways. Although it may feel like a quick release to spill our unfiltered feelings when we are upset on social media, it’s wise to think twice before pressing ‘enter.’

Another top tip for you before we wrap up, your phone and the internet can be very addictive for both teens and adults alike. When used the wrong way, it can negatively affect our mental and even physical health. As tempting as it is to pick up the phone every time it blinks with a notification, remember that your health is more important in the long run. So instead of letting your phone dictate your every move, remember that you have the power to control your own habits including have regular times away from the screen.





December | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like...

# HAVING MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

A part of growing up in a society that tends to put people in boxes, means you and I have to deal with so many stereotypes associated with being a teen. I mean, raise your hand if you've been called at least one of these things - "lazy", "unbothered", "shy", "stubborn" - is your hand up? Thought so! Sometimes, we are so busy trying to navigate this crucial time in between childhood and adulthood, from being social, to managing peer pressure, and even maintaining good grades - that sometime people think it's okay to put us in a box. For example, it's easy to think that shy teens don't like people or that all teens have an attitude. But when we truly try to understand others, it turns out that people are not so simple and in fact are very complex beings with so much more than what we see on the surface. That's why I want you to end 2022 on a high note - by having meaningful conversations, acting with intention and embarking on a journey of shared discovery. So go out there, be brave and spruce up the courage to speak to someone new, have a heart-to-heart with your best friend or even take the time to connect with someone outside your background. You will be amazed by the power of meaningful conversations, just by having the courage to go out there and broaden your horizons. These actions can be as simple as asking someone "how are you?" and truly listening to what they say, asking your grandparents or older relatives about their childhood or even reflecting on your life goals with your best friend!

And while we work on this, let's also end this year with gratitude. What accomplishments are you proud of this year? It doesn't matter if they are big or small, from winning a school prize to even keeping up with your study routine - it all counts! On behalf of everyone rooting for you, I am so proud of your empowerment journey so far. So remember to take rest, care for yourself and have a great ending to this incredible year!





# What's the big deal about... EMPOWERMENT?

Empowerment is a special word we like to use to describe the life-changing journey that girls need to follow in their way towards becoming brave women. It's a bit like this very special right of passage, but the beautiful thing about empowerment is that it belongs to every single girl out there - including the person reading this journal right now! But what does "empowerment" mean for a young girl like you? It's simply about harnessing that inner power we all have within us for our good and the good of those around us. You might be thinking... "but Olu, I don't feel powerful. No one has called me that before. I am just a teen." I promise you, no matter how old you are where you come from, you and I have an inner power, the power within us - it's recognizing and valuing this power that you are born with but that's going to need a little bit your effort. In fact, the "girl box" that we explored in previous pages of this journal are made up and by society and passed down through generation and learned by you and I through people and institutions around us. Unless we look deeper, we don't recognize the inner power we have - but trust me, it's there... waiting to be discovered.

This unjust "girl box" that society tries to push us into is one reason that's making you feel powerless, vulnerable or even less unique. Can you think of any incidents that have made you feel this way? These incidents can make us feel like our choices, actions and opportunities must be limited within the boundaries of the "girl box." When I was your age, I had grownups tell me that a girl can only be a teacher, nurse, assistant, or housewife. But my brother was told he can be a doctor, lawyer, scientist, or even the President of Sri Lanka! I was so confused by this - why can't girls have similar dreams?

As I grew older, I realized how non-sensical society's "girl box" can be. I realized that every girl has as much freedom to like being a lawyer or doctor, cricketer or even a mechanic as much as she would like to be a teacher or nurse - our dreams and goals should not be limited by our gender or background. I am sure that as a young girl, you may have started having questions like I did. If you've started questioning the things around you, such as wanting to understand more about people, systems, and structures... then congratulations! This is the first step in your journey towards empowerment. The next few pages include 5 key action points of power that all brave young girls can embody in their daily lives - it explores 5 vital areas of empowerment that are very important for your journey. I hope it helps you as much as it helped me!



# Power over

Every day, you and I move through different systems of power that other people have made for us. In order to be empowered, we need to understand what power really is in the first place. It's simple – power means the ability to influence someone else to do something you want them to do. We cannot classify it as 'good' or 'bad'... power is just another concept that helps us understand people and situations more clearly. Understanding the 4 dimensions of power is very important for girls to grasp. Trust me, I promise you that with this new understanding, you're bound to understand the world more clearly and get a lot of answers to some of the burning questions you have – including the nature of interactions we have with those around us.

#1? Let's explore "Power Over" – To have power "over" something means being able to exert force or authority over someone else. Think about the government vs. individual citizens, or men vs. women and even parent vs. child. The thing about having power over someone is that it this type of power can be seen in direct and obvious ways – boyfriends forcing girlfriends to select friend only approved by them or forcing girlfriends to share pictures against girls will or it could even be invisible power upon us by multinationals to use their products to become the girls of their beauty standards , for example.

Power over could be even worse for girls like us when it's used to justify use of violence over us by men round us. And gives them the power to physically, emotionally or sexually abuse girls and ultimately put the blame on girls – either on the way they were dressed, the time they were attacked or even the place. Or it could even be a situation where a girl is asked to leave her job after marriage or limiting the people a girl could have connections with.

Activity: Think of the people who have power "over" you. Write down their names, positions, and your reflections about this dynamic. Need help? Here's my reflection.



**Who has power  
'over' me?**

**Their  
position**

**Olu's reflection**

Amma and Thaththa

My parents

Amma and Thaththa can limit my phone time and not give permission to hang out with friends. Even though they have this power, they don't exercise it all the time - only when I misbehave. So I know Amma and Thaththa limits my freedom only because they want me to learn a lesson so I won't repeat the same mistake next time.

Anoma aunty

My neighbour

Anoma aunty thinks that I have to get married after O/Ls. She is always talking to Amma about it. I don't like the power she has over me because sometimes Amma believes her because she is an adult and also her friend. Sometimes, even though I tell Amma I don't want to get married so early, Amma doesn't care because she looks up to Anoma aunty as her guide. People like Anoma aunty looks at girls from the limited 'girl box' perspective which defines a girl in terms of her reproductive role.

See how that works? Although power is not inherently good or bad - the way it shows up in peoples' lives can either lead to justice or injustice. But when can power be seen in more positive ways? That's where we explore 'power with', 'power to' and 'power within' over the next few pages.





# Power to

Remember how we learned that power can appear in different ways? Power to means the ability to make decisions about your life. It means we have the power to make choices and to have the access and control over opportunities, resources, information, and services while also being able to take time for your own self. As young girls, we are made to feel so vulnerable and dependent that we don't feel so independent. As a result, we may not try hard enough to enhance our life skills and improve our knowledge. We become so dependent that learn to become afraid of the darkness and even insects! Sometimes, girls are also made to become dependent on our daily needs as we seek support from our fathers, brothers or from any male member in the family for many simple technical tasks such as using an electric equipment, changing a bulb or even chasing away a snake that would come to our doorstep. Can you recall times that you had to wait for support? How has this sense of dependency had limited your life and independence?

You may have even avoided taking certain decisions in life because you felt that you are not skilled enough, especially when it comes to non-traditional, technical skills, since you were not taught them due to girl box rules assuming it's not "a girl's job." By failing to understand that we the power to define our lives, we may have even limited our choices to traditional 'girly' career options because we felt that girls cannot be 'pilots' or mechanics, for example.





# Power with

Did you also know that power can come in numbers? Sometimes when you watch news on TV, you may have seen protests or strikes by a group of people who are facing injustice. This is an example of collective power where individuals collaborate and build meaningful relationships "with" others in order to support a common goal. Let me tell you a story. Just last year, I was able to share my power 'with' my fellow batchmates when our exams were scheduled to be held in the middle of the covid-19 outbreak. We knew that it would cause some injustice because students have to put their health at risk and some other have to travel long distances in public transport to sit for the exam. Therefore, all the students of my batch made use of our collective power and requested for the school administration to postpone the exams or find another way of evaluation. Because we had strength in numbers and also shared understanding of our common problem which affects us all in similar manner, our school eventually was influenced by the large request of the students and decided to conduct take-home exams that term. If only I had requested such a thing, "without" power shared with my classmates, I would have not been heard or able to get such a big outcome. But because all of us shared our power of collective need "with" each other, we were able to influence the outcome we wanted.

So as you can see, this is the kind of power we all have that can grow our of collaboration and stronger relationships with others. It cannot exist without respect, support and collective decision-making. So let's use our collective power to climb out of the "girl box."





## When was a time you shared power 'with' others?

### Olu's reflection:

Last week, when I was going home after tuition class, some men in motorbikes started commenting on my looks which made me very uncomfortable. So, I took the courage to speak out against them with my other friends. Razik and Heshan as well as my best friend Pişumi were also there - they too were irritated like me. We collectively responded that women have the right to walk on the road peacefully. Because of our collective response, we were able to challenge this unjust situation as they drove away quickly. Although these men wanted to have power 'over' me, we used our collective power in order to change the dynamics of domination and control in this scenario.

### My reflection:



# Power within

Now I am excited to share with you my favourite type of power - the one that we all get from within our own selves. Yes, when I say "we" I mean every single one of us - including the girl reading this right now! Often, we think that power lies with those who have money, or status, or a fancy title. Although this is true - remember that power can also come from 'within' all of us. Yes, you got that right... this refers to our personal power and the strength we have inside us. All those subjects we explored this year -like confidence, emotional wellbeing, and self-awareness.... They all contribute to power within. It's because of the power you have within you that makes you able to pass exams, maintain good friendships, help others when they are down and even recover from a bad experience and most importantly feel so good and positive about your own self. It's easy to dismiss this power we have inside us, because of society's "girl box." As young girls, we grow up wanting to be so much more than we already are, but sometimes we feel we don't deserve to grab that opportunity to take a stand when we witness injustice, because of society's expectations of the "prim and proper" girl.

It's time to challenge these harmful trends in society and truly understand the power of our own self by giving space for our personal dignity and self-worth. So, from now onwards, I hope you take the time to increase awareness of where you are situated in this point in time, your values, talents, strengths and even weaknesses - and truly understand the possibility of doing something about it for your good and the good of those around you.







## Are you ready to harness your inner power?

**Cross off each box as you complete them! Come back to this page whenever you accomplish a task – hint! Use a bookmark.**

I expressed  
how I feel  
to a friend

I stood up  
to something  
that was  
unjust

I volunteered  
for a  
community  
service project

I took rest  
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concentrate

I take time  
to spend some  
time in and  
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I made a  
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strengths

I made a  
list of my  
weaknesses

I began  
spending more  
time with kind  
people

I imagined  
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This is your year!  
Calendar 2023

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## All Brave Young Girls need.. KINDNESS AND COMPASSION

Olu wishes a VERY HAPPY NEW YEAR to the brave young girl reading this! I hope you had a very close connection with this journal and noted down all your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Now, I invite you to do the same this year as well. Let's be connected and expressive and continue this self-dialogue. A brand-new year is the perfect time to reflect on our goals and learn from the past - surely a key ingredient to ensure that we continue this journey of empowerment. In fact, I have a very special wish for you, my friend... My 2023 resolution for you stop looking backward and start looking forward at the amazing possibilities in front of you! The past year may have had many bumps along the way mixed with several triumphs - there may have been moments where you cried, lost someone you love, experienced an embarrassing situation and even experienced failure. These moments are very common, not just among teen girls like you but anyone out there. But teen girls especially, can experience added "bumps" along our empowerment journey due to the "girl box" we talked about. Remember the "girl box?" It's the rigid set of expectations and perceptions of "ladylike" behaviour which limits the freedom and choices of girls everywhere - an idea that all brave young girls must challenge as we go along.

Now - with this new year you've probably heard a lot of talk about New Year's Resolutions - a set of promises, goals, new habits that people establish for themselves as a way to improve their selves and lives. But do you make New Year's resolutions each year and find it hard to follow them through? Do you beat yourself up when you fail? Trust me, this is more common than you imagine. The reason most of us fail to stick to our resolutions is because they are either not specific or realistic enough. The trick is to set realistic, measurable, and action-oriented goals so we can strive gradually to complete them. And I have just the right start for you! I invite you to begin 2023 with a plan to practise kindness and self-compassion. By making "kindness" your key word for 2023, it can positively affect yourself, your friends, your community, and believe it or not, the world! This is because kindness and compassion has the transformative effect of causing a chain reaction, since when one person experiences kindness they will most likely pass it on to others. Let's welcome the New Year with the courage to be kind - are you ready? Let's begin!



## January | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like... PRACTISING SELF-COMPASSION

I truly believe that kindness isn't just something we should want—kindness is something we absolutely need in our lives. It gives our actions, choices and behaviour more meaning and fulfilment, simply by treating ourselves and others with care, respect and compassion. That's right! – Your resolution to be kind would not be complete if you do not practice self-compassion first; that is, kindness directed at your own self.

The social world young girls like you have to navigate can include pressures from school, peers, family, religion and the wider community. While teenage years as a young girl can challenge you to your core since it's a crucial period of growth and learning, your placement within the confines of the "girl box" can get in the way of practicing self-compassion as well. Being inside the girl box can feel like a struggle between displaying our true authentic selves and the made-up self we think society wants us to be. This made-up self we all try to be to please society may include trying to look beautiful and sexy, expecting to- and being judged only by our looks, to be smart but not as smart as our male peers, and to tolerate sexual harassment because it happens to all girls, etc. These girl box standards are so harmful to young girls like you and can prevent you from practising self-compassion. Because of this pressure to reject your authentic self, you may experience low self-esteem, harmful relationships with boys, more and more dependence on others to solve your problems, lesser achievements and even lesser self-satisfaction. You may unknowingly put your life at risk if you are not compassionate to your own self.



This is when self-compassion can be so important to bridge the gap between your true self and this culturally scripted identity that young girls tend to build in order to not feel like an outsider. But with the right tools, self-compassion can help you boost your self-worth while also finding a steady footing in society. But remember, do not punish yourself for trying to be someone you're not - as teens, it's normal to take time to explore your unique identity and even make up a personality that doesn't feel like you but "works" to please others. So let's begin by taking small steps each day to be kind to yourself!

1. Don't compare yourself to others. (Simply because it makes no sense to do so - we all have our unique background and circumstances and it's your distinctive traits, looks, actions, and thoughts that make you - YOU!

2. Be kind to your body. Take rest, exercise, stop negative self-talk, appreciate your unique beauty, wear clothes that compliment your body. Avoid thoughts of self-harming, even as a response to others or in trying to punish others by harming yourself.

3. Spend time for yourself - read a book, dance in the shower, try a new hobby, explore nature. This helps you appreciate what you have and helps you realize that true happiness comes from within.

Be grateful for the things you have - this includes your loved ones, your unique strengths and accomplishments as well as how you have moved past troubled times bravely.



**Write down 10 things you like about yourself.**

**(As an extra step, copy these 10 things onto a sheet of paper and stick them to your mirror or desk!)**

## January | Week 3-4

# Empowerment looks like...

## OVERCOMING SELF-BLAME

Let's explore another common emotion experienced by many young girls – self-blame since its so much related to self compassion. Self blame can block your efforts towards self-compassion

When you and I are inside the girl box, it's so hard to move away from expectations to lose weight or gain weight, have clear skin, dress like a girl but not so much that we show too much skin, have good grades, and even tolerate forms of mistreatment, often done by boys and men on the street, at the market, in the buses/trains or even at home. One of the silly girl box rules we grow up learning is that girls are "supposed" to tolerate a lot of things, such as family problems, crises, sexual harassment and even verbal abuse – because some men and boys could be sometimes violent or aggressive. Truth is, nobody is born violent. It is the social norms we learn that teach us that it's ok to do or not do something. While the girl box expects girls to be tolerant and passive, there is also a "man box" that teaches men that they have to be aggressive in order to maintain social power... a very silly rule in my opinion! However, one thing to keep in mind is that self-blame is not always a bad thing. Sometimes, it helps us accept responsibility, or feel shame to prevent us from hurting others and letting us learn from our mistakes. It helps us be more empathetic to each other.





However, because of this 'girl box' ... we may try to blame ourselves for things that are not our fault. A common example of blaming oneself when it is not our fault is during incidents where someone (usually a man/boy), makes us feel uncomfortable due to unwelcome sexual remarks or physical contact. These kinds of incidents are referred to as sexual harassment - an occurrence which unfortunately happens to many young girls and something we all need to be careful of. Sexual harassment happens when there is a power imbalance between the harasser and the harassed. They resort to these wrong actions to feel more powerful or exert control over others. Because girls are "supposed" to be tolerant or because we think that it's normal. When such incident happens, you must have also heard your mothers and aunts saying - "this is women's "karume" or 'urume" - these statements contribute to we often reputting the blame on ourselves. Self-blame can sound a lot like "he wouldn't have touched me if I was dressed differently," or "if I stayed silent, he wouldn't have said those nasty things about my body," or "they didn't mean to do it," and "it was my own fault for making him angry." Remember that sexual harassment is NEVER the victim's fault. Because teen girls are usually openly criticized, unfairly blamed, and held up to unrealistic standards when growing up - our first instinct is to put the fault on ourselves. Self-blame can occur in other situations apart from sexual harassment as well, such as bullying or unfair treatment in a public place. Frequent incidents of self-blame in young teens like yourself can negatively affect your confidence and wellbeing. So this week, I invite you to replace self-blame with self-care. In the following page, I'll show you how.

Practise the following affirmations to help you overcome self-blame.

1. Reclaim your power. When a bad event happens, it's easy to feel powerless. Practise saying things like "I have the power to choose my own levels of engagement with others," "It's okay for me to be alone because I deserve it," "I deserve to ask for help," "I am doing the best I can," "I am loved."
2. It's okay to take time to make sense of situations. When we're young, we experience so many new dynamics and environments which can leave us feel confused and uncomfortable. Remember that it's ok to take the time you need to feel yourself again and gradually understand the dynamics, reasons, and outcomes of events
3. Seek support. Whenever you feel overcome with thoughts of rejections, unworthiness - talk to a loved one or seek support from a mental health professional to help you make sense of your placement in a certain situation or environment. Seeking support does not make us weak, but rather resilient. Brave young girls should not be afraid to admit they need a listening ear or some extra support to help us bounce back to our happy, confident selves!



## February | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like... RESPECTING DIVERSE VIEWS

A big change that happens in our teen years is the need to assert ourselves more actively instead of conforming to certain views that we used to blindly follow as kids. As much as young girls like you begin to explore your identity and this newfound independence, we may also clash with others who may not necessarily think and act like you and your friends do. In fact, being able to exchange views and ideas while listening to, acknowledging, and considering the views of others is a hallmark of true empowerment for young girls. This can be easier said than done when we live inside the girl box because society always expects girls to act, think and behave the same way instead of being our own unique selves. So acknowledging the views of someone else instead of instantly dismissing them can be challenging since this may make you feel like uncomfortable in some ways. However, if we are to truly step out of the bounds of the girl box to an environment that accepts young girls in all our diversity... it's important to keep in mind that we can disagree with someone else while also staying respectful. It also means that sometimes, we must be open to changing our current opinions when we receive new information and not be ashamed of shifting opinions. If the previous stance is something you no longer believe in. For example, I remember being so against this concept of "feminism" when I was a young girl... a few of my friends used to laugh at the word because we were told that feminists are "man-haters" who have nothing better to do with their lives. But a few years later at a workshop I was attending, I got the opportunity to engage with a few women's rights activists from a non-profit organization who was helping our village set up shelters for victims of domestic violence. The aunts there explained to us that feminism in fact isn't "anti-men" at all but actually a social movement that calls for equality between all genders and one that acknowledges that even men are sometimes hurt by this system called the patriarchy.

See how that worked? In my journey of empowerment, I was able to change my opinion because I received new information and I no longer believed in my previous stance. Likewise, we must always be open to diverse views and have the courage to disagree with others in a respectful manner. After all, it's a practice that has resulted in a lot of healthy and fruitful relationships!





February | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like... PRACTISING NON-JUDGMENT

I'm sure you and I can both agree that nobody likes being negatively judged. However, it's a very common occurrence that from our early years to adulthood; one could even say it's human nature. Remember that girl box I keep coming back to? Society's rules about how girls must behave can often leave us feeling judged by others while also encourage us to be judgmental of others. A judgmental person is basically someone who forms opinions or perceptions about another person or group too quickly instead of waiting to know more about them. Sound familiar? That's because our teenage years are often the first time we come across and realize that judgement is a common everyday occurrence that both you and I as well as society have done at some point. In fact, my friend Piyumi shared with me recently that whenever she visits school, thoughts like "is something wrong with my hair?" "Why are they staring at me?" comes to mind instantly. I am sure you or someone you know may have felt the same way at certain times, and trust me, it's more common than you realize. That's because our teen years are often a time when we would do anything to feel like accepted by the wider community. But just because being surrounded by people who are judgmental and even being judgmental ourselves is so common... it doesn't mean that we need to accept it and let it affect our self-esteem and mental wellbeing. Girls who are truly empowered would make conscious efforts to avoid judging people too quickly and even challenge others who are judgmental.

As you mature, you will learn that people deserve to be judged by their character and personality traits, instead of appearance and background. In fact, the more I started choosing friends based on these traits instead of considering their "coolness" ranking or appearance for example, the more genuine and lasting those friendships tend to be. Wanna know my surprising observation? After I left school and attended a reunion, I noticed that most of the "cool" kids were now just like the rest of us, while others who were cornered or bullied are now super successful in their own fields. My point is, it's character that really matters in the end!





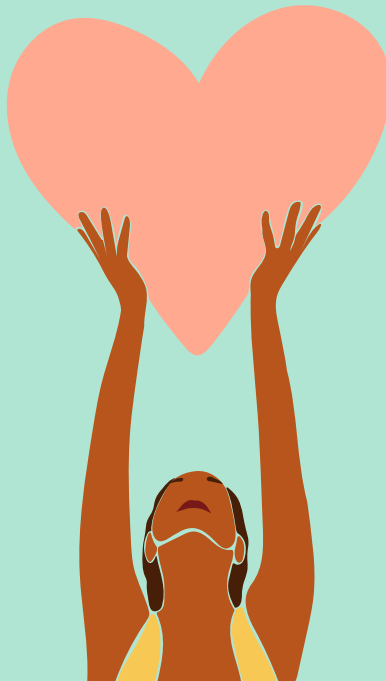
## March | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like...

## BEING KIND TO OTHERS

I wanna let you in on a little secret to true empowerment... being kind has changed my life and it can change yours too. Remember how we talked about self-compassion earlier? I am sure you are still practicing that. Let's look on kindness towards the rest of the world including our own surroundings and environment. Kindness with care is crucial to our survival.

On a personal level, kindness has helped me perform better at school, helped me find true friendship and even boosted my reputation as a reliable and good friend, daughter, and student. Now - I know that you probably heard this phrase "be kind" thrown around all the time, to the point that you might be fed up hearing it! But trust me, those motivation books or lectures weren't kidding when they say that kindness is the key to being happy and successful. Practising kindness can be particularly important for teen girls as we navigate these challenging times of COVID-19, pressures from school and the silly rules imposed from within the girl box. Once you come to the realization that almost all girls your age faces these pressures in one way or another, the more you may understand why it's so important to me kind.



For example, I remember just recently, I was going to the market on Sunday, and I saw Sachini at the nearby kade. Sachini was in a wheelchair due to an accident that had happened last year. Because of the lockdown, mudalali uncle was so busy that day and to make matters worse there was even a queue. I joined Sachini at the end of the line and began a conversation to check how she was and pass time. I was able to find out that she had been having trouble completing her homework because of the housework duties at home and challenges faced due to being on a wheelchair. Having listened to her concerns, I then offered to help with the housework as her parents were out of town. Later that week, she shared how I had been a strength to her during that difficult time and because of the help I offered, she managed to find time to complete her homework on time! Notice how simple kindness can be? It could be as easy as talking to someone, sharing their workload and even being sensitive to their unique circumstances.

If you're still not convinced, know that even research shows that kindness is linked to increased peer acceptance, improved academic performance, and positive mental health! At any age where most of us teen girls are vulnerable to bullying, anxiety and discrimination – it's a crucial time to understand the value of being kind to others. So next time you interact with others, make sure to smile, ask how they are and be less critical in our engagements!



## March | Week 3-4

# Empowerment looks like... UNDERSTANDING PRIVILEGE

Would you agree that sometimes, it feels like we live in a very complicated world? Whenever we watch news or scroll through the internet, we are likely to see at least one event of racial discrimination, sexual harassment, or even corruption – isn't it. This can leave us feeling very confused and hopeless about our future. But did you know that as a young girl, you and your peers are at a unique position to challenge this status quo as future leaders of this very same society? That's right! Even though our environment is riddled with so many injustices, we have the change to rebuild and truly work towards a changed society. But to do that, the first step to understanding these issues is to dig deeper into this concept we call "privilege." Privilege helps us understand that we live in an unfair system that benefits some people at the expense of others. Let me give a simple explanation to help you grasp this concept. Now, imagine that your parent gives you two toffees and your younger sister only one every day when we return home from school. Imagine that they continue this practice for no reason every day. Would that be fair? It's not. This simple example is not too different from incidents of racism and sexism that we see daily.

For example, sexism refers to giving someone extra benefits or privileges just because he is a man. Or racism can be when majority of the population in Sri Lanka are given more privileges or social acceptance, while other minorities get lesser social respect. It means some people are either discriminated, less privileged or made to feel more vulnerable when they want to either access information, services, resources which are commonly available for all population just because they are female, disabled or belonging to a specific geographic area or social class, for example, when a male, or able-bodied person naturally gets free access for mobility any place or any time, women or disabled wouldn't have got the same access. That can be very unfair, isn't it? This type of discrimination arises due to senseless norms and stereotypes that people make up against other groups, such as between men and women. These aspects of receiving benefits and advantages more than another group are part of being "privileged."

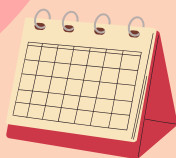




A big part of being empowered is to have a self-reflection on how although it's not an inherently bad thing to be privileged, we must take steps to ensure that privilege is used to stand up for the rights and freedoms of those without it. So, let's begin by first identifying some ways by which we might be privileged (eg: being men, majority population, having a home, being able-bodied, etc) and then challenging injustices that occur to those without privilege. Can you think of ways that you are unfairly privileged?

Let's also think of a few actions that we can take. Actions can range from holding our peers accountable when they say something against another community, ensuring that marginalized peers have a chance to express their views, being a safe space for someone who is experiencing injustice due to unfair systems. What else can we do to use our privilege for good?

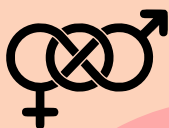




## All Brave Young Girls need.. TO UNDERSTAND PUBERTY AND SEXUALITY

Perhaps the biggest change that we need to deal with as teen girls are changes to our body and onset of sexuality. Starting from around age eight, teen girls reach an important stage of development where your body begins to take on an adult form. We see changes to our physical body and experience new feelings that can change the previous dynamics we had with our parents and peers. Experiencing puberty and onset of sexuality is a time for all young girls to be brave enough to deal with all these major changes. Now, I know that change can be scary. Suddenly, people expect you to be independent, you may not feel like 'you' inside your own body for a while and may even be confused by some new feelings of attraction that seems to be arising lately. These are all major changes that happen to all young girls as we prepare to cross that wonderful bridge from childhood to adulthood. And I think you are already so brave for facing these changes with courage! A great way to cope with these changes is to always feel free learn more about puberty and onset of sexuality. This is because sometimes the fear or confusion we feel arises because we don't have enough information to make sense of things we do not know. Puberty is such a broad topic and it's natural to have so many questions that we need answers to. Which is why, over the next three months, you and I are going to explore some key topics of puberty and sexuality. Apart from the information here, you may want to discuss or explore many other topics related to this subject – so make sure you speak to a trusted adult or seek information through other reliable ways to learn them.

Sometimes, living inside the girl box, you may hear that girls are not supposed to learn these things because they are bad or against our culture. But how can a natural part of growing up be such a bad thing? These girl box rules arise because society may not like it when girls become independent or empowered through learning, as it interferes with the power that men (or society!) usually have over women. Truth is, both boys and girls have the right to learn about this crucial period of our lives and the changes it brings in order to navigate our journey into adulthood responsibly. So, remember that learning about our bodies and sexuality is an important part of a girl's empowerment journey and there is nothing wrong with wanting to know about it.



April | Week 1-2

## Empowerment looks like... DEALING WITH CHANGES IN MY BODY

Fun fact - during puberty, your body will grow faster than at any other time in your life, except for when you were a baby! So it's no wonder we feel overwhelmed during our teen years with so much happening to and around us. You may notice that while some of your girl friends may begin looking like adults, others would still look like kids.. that's because there is no set age for when puberty begins because it's different for each of us. For those born as girls, a special chemical called hormones are released inside your body to help you grow into an adult. As a result, breasts start to form (usually the first sign of puberty!), hips widen, pubic hair underarms and near your genitals begin to grow, and our period eventually begin. Both teen girls and boys may also get acne as glands on our body start becoming more active and produces more oil. They may also gain weight and have different sleep patterns than earlier. These are only a few out of many changes that all teen girls experience in their journey to becoming strong, beautiful and brave young girls.

A key point to keep in mind is the importance of healthy lifestyle choices during this exciting life stage. Consider following some of these steps to adjust to these changes and make the best of your teenage years amid those "growing pains."

- Have healthy meals. As we grow, our bodies have an increased appetite and need more food. But as tempting as it may be to eat junk food or sweets all the time, remember to have a nutritious balanced diet. Bright fruits and vegetables for example have been a secret behind healthy skin and overall health, as well as drinking lots of water to flush out toxins out of our bodies!
- Exercise for at least 30 minutes every day at least a 20 minutes' walk - this helps our mental AND physical health.
- Get good quality sleep. It's important to respect your body by having enough rest
- Go bra shopping! As your breasts start to grow, it's important to protect breast tissue and keep them supported.
- Practicing good hygiene and using a deodorant can help us address increased sweating and body odour (a very normal occurrence all teen girls experience)

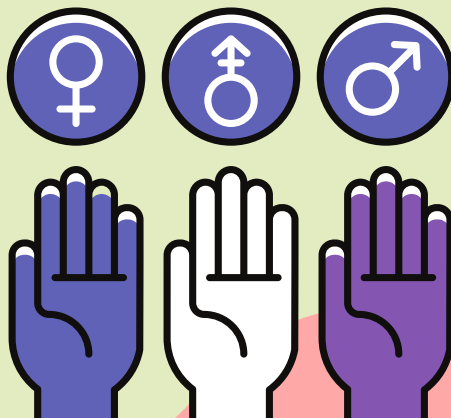


April | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like... DISCOVERING OUR GENDER IDENTITY

A big part of being a teen is gradually figuring out who you are in terms of your gender identity and sexual orientation. Gender identity is all about how you feel inside and how you show your gender through your appearance and behaviour. Now the girl box that most of us trapped inside can sometimes tell us that the world is separated into 'masculine' and 'feminine' – like girls should wear pink, have long hair, wear skirts while boys must avoid doing these same things. But living up to these nonsensical rules can prevent us from living our best lives.

When we speak of gender identity, some teens may feel like their body was formed in a way that doesn't fit who they are. Teens who feel this way can still be in the process of deciding if they are male, female or somewhere between the gender spectrum. Those who identify as the opposite sex from the one they were given at birth, are called transgender. If someone identifies as the same sex they were given at birth, then they are called cisgender. There is nothing abnormal or "bad" about either of these terms. Besides, it's okay to not have everything figured out at your age. In fact, it's normal to not be 100% sure about your gender identity until later in life. But it's important to keep in mind that not everyone who has a penis is a boy or man, and not everyone who has a vulva is a girl or woman. We are all complex beings figuring our layered identities as we journey through life. But when some people have trouble understanding this concept, they may think that transgender people are against the order of nature, has a mental illness, or are trying to trick others. These harmful ideas are not true. In fact, our multiple gender identities are one of the things that make us unique and human. As empowered youth, it's important to respect and defend transgender and gender nonconforming people from violence and hate. A part of stepping out of the girl box is also knowing that it's never okay to bully someone because of how they express their gender. So let's end this week's learning by reflecting on this insightful quote by Audre Lorde: "It's not the differences that divide us, it's our incapacity to recognize, accept and celebrate those differences."





## May | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like...

## MAINTAINING MENSTRUAL HEALTH AND HYGIENE

There are a bunch of important information that all teen girls ought to know when we first get our periods. Periods are a result of changes in hormones in the body, who send messages to our body cause the lining of the uterus (or womb) to build up. This gets the uterus ready for an egg (from the woman) and sperm (from the man) to attach and grow into a baby. If the woman does not get pregnant, the lining breaks down and bleeds. That is why most girls and women get their periods around once a month. Using a pad, tampon or menstrual cup are some of the ways we can deal with our period flow.

Pads are cotton padded material that come in different sizes and shapes, with sticky strips that attach to the underwear. A tampon is a cotton plug that a girl puts into her vagina to absorb the blood, which needs to be replaced regularly (8 hours or ideally less) - ideal for when playing sports or swimming. Some girls also use menstrual cups that is inserted into a vagina which holds the blood until it is removed. It's important to change a pad, tampon or menstrual cup 3-6 times a day to maintain hygiene and prevent infection. Many girls also experience cramps while on their period, which can be relieved by applying a hot water bottle on your belly. Remember that it's normal if you feel you want to see a doctor if your period cramps are unbearable and getting in the way of your daily routine. Doctors can help prescribe medicine that reduces the pain or detect any underlying issues. You might also be surprised to know that some activities were once considered taboo during menstruation, like bathing and exercising. This is because in olden days, people used to think that menstruation was a sickness or disability, among other reasons. But truth is, periods is a completely normal and natural occurrence, and these activities are healthy and may even help with period cramps. Since you may hear a lot of myths and strange misconceptions about periods growing up, it's advisable to speak to a medical doctor or nurse to clarify anything you're not sure of and get the right information in order to have a safe and healthy period.





May | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like... CLEANLINESS AND PERSONAL GROOMING

As teen girls, it's important to be clean and presentable so that our unique beauty and confidence can shine through! This is why cleanliness and personal grooming must be an essential part of our day during our exciting teenage years and all throughout adulthood. Certain important sets of practices help us maintain cleanliness, promote our health, and even prevent diseases or illness. When we were kids, our parents or guardians would do most of the cleaning and looking after for us. But the great thing about becoming an adult is that we get to choose our personal cleanliness routine and how we carry ourselves. Besides, it's that secret behind some of the comments we get like "wow, you smell great today!" or "how did you get your hair to look so thick and shiny?" Here are a few personal grooming tips that have helped me boost my confidence, feel happy and healthy and be comfortable around other people. Maybe it may help you too!

1. Taking care of my skin by washing my face and body regularly. If you have acne, it's always best to use a mild cleanser that does not have many fancy chemicals or a strong smell, because it may make acne worse.
2. Washing hair with a mild shampoo at least twice or thrice a week and applying a good haircare oil to keep our hair healthy and protect it from harsh weather or other irritants.
3. Since fingernails can attract germs if not taken care of, it's important to cut them regularly and scrub out any dirt when necessary.
4. Practise good oral hygiene by brushing teeth at least twice a day to avoid bad breath or tooth decay.
5. Remove sweat and bacteria by washing regularly, especially after coming home from school or after sports practise.
6. Safely dispose of sanitary products like pads or tampons after use. Don't flush them down the toilet as it can clog drains. Instead, roll your pad, wrap them in a newspaper and throw them in a bin. It's also advisable to use washable pads if you can prepare them at home using a proper material.
7. Avoid wearing the same undergarments and socks after one use, because they have dirt, bacteria, sweat and bodily secretions that need to be removed when washing clothes.
8. It's also important to clean your vaginal area specially during your periods. If you notice any infection in this area do not ignore it and don't be shy to share with your mother, aunt or a friend.







June | Week 1-2

## Empowerment looks like... UNDERSTANDING PEER RELATIONS AND CONSENT

As young girls, we may also find an increase in sexual feelings along with changes to our body. It's normal to feel both excited and worried about these new feelings you may have to confront because it can change the dynamics you have with friends and peers. So, understanding our own sexual feelings is another way that young girls like you find a sense of empowerment. You may have heard of the term sexual orientation before. What this means is the emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction that a person feels toward another person. If someone is attracted to a person of the opposite sex, they are heterosexual or 'straight' while those attracted to the same sex are 'homosexual' or gay/lesbian. Bisexual people on the other hand are attracted to both male and female persons, while asexual persons do not have an interest in sexual activity but may be emotionally attracted to others.

All these different sexual orientations are usually the result of both biological and psychological factors and not necessarily something a person voluntarily chooses. Learning about relationships and our sexuality can be a difficult, especially in our culture where it is not openly talked about. So it's okay to take the time you need to learn about navigating relationships and love in the right way and right time. It's not advisable to start relationships when you do not have much clarity of your feelings and relationships at an early age. It can also distract your education and life goals. Having a relationship during teen years is not a must and not having relationship is nothing to feel bad about. It's not a trend that you should force yourself in to.



Often, because of the girl box we live in, you may also sense a power imbalance in our relationships. Boyfriends, for example, may try to exert their dominance and control over their girlfriends, such as forcing them to engage in sexual activities when the girl does not want to, or even limiting their engagements with other friends or even forcing you to share your private information and photos. Sometimes, boys may exploit a girl's insecurities or low self-esteem to flatter them; I'm sure most young girls have heard things like "you're not like other girls" etc. So, trust me, don't underestimate the importance of ensuring the person you are in a relationship with is respectful and good; someone you can be your authentic self around and most importantly someone who does not pressure you to do something you don't want to do. This is why consent is a very important element of any healthy relationship.

Consent must be given without feeling forced and in a clear state of mind. To easily remember this, just think of the following formula:

## ASK > LISTEN > RESPECT.

Consent is all about figuring out your personal boundaries. For example, you might be comfortable hugging and holding hands during the first phase of a relationship. But if your boyfriend, for example, pressures you to kiss and touch, and if it's something you are not ready for, it means that he does not have your consent to do so. Remember that these personal boundaries can change depending on the nature and stage of a relationship, but they can also be withdrawn. If, at any point, you feel uncomfortable, know that you can always redefine those boundaries again.



OR



**What are some of your personal boundaries?**

June | Week 3-4

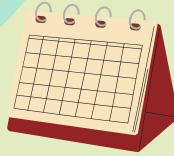
## Empowerment looks like... KNOWING SAFE AND UNSAFE TOUCH

Over the past months, we've explored several important topics together. As we keep moving forward with more topics, I encourage you to keep in mind that you are very brave for being open to learn more about all these diverse and complex topics in your incredible effort to become empowered! Our journey to becoming smart young girls would not be complete if we did not talk a bit more about some of the dangers and vulnerabilities most girls need to be careful of. One of these must-know topics is that of sexual harassment. To navigate the bigger world more intelligently, young girls like you deserve to know more about what kind of world we live in. Because of the girl box we are put in, sometimes we may be seen as vulnerable, lacking in confidence, and even expected to suffer in silence. But true empowerment comes with having the courage to challenge these assumptions that society has about women. Because of these assumptions about women and ideas about masculinity, some men who appear to be in a position of power over others do things in order to feel more powerful. One way they try to have power over others is through harmful acts like sexual harassment - which is a lot like bullying. It's when someone makes comments to someone in a sexual nature or even touches them when they do not agree to be touched.

It's important to understand that our bodies have boundaries and it's wrong for anyone to violate our right to personal space. An easy way to understand sexual harassment is by asking ourselves if a touch makes you feel safe or unsafe. For example, when Amma or malli hugs me, it makes me feel safe and happy. But sometimes when some boys or older men I do not know try to hug or get close to me, I feel uncomfortable and even angry. Remember that unsafe touches can come from anyone, even people you may know. So, trust your gut and always share any bad experience with a trusted adult when you don't feel safe around someone or a group of people. Brave young girls also have every right to express themselves whenever their personal space is violated. Remember that you have control over your body and that people who truly respect you will understand that. It's also important to know that these acts are punishable under the law. And that you can report an incident to national helplines 1938 or 1929.







## All Brave Young Girls need.. LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Have you ever had moments when you are in class or in a group project when you feel like raising a hand and speaking up about your views on something – but end up not doing it? Or what about that time you wanted to organize a study group by getting a group together but felt like you weren't good enough? Your experience may not be the same, but I am sure that every young girl has had a point in time where they felt they could take the lead but ended up backing away for many reasons. Yes... it's more common than you think. This is because more often not, we are taught that inside the girl box, women are supposed to let men or boys lead while women and girls take the more nurturing or caring role. This may make it seem that men "naturally" have what it takes to take charge, control a situation and be a good leader – but that's not true. Fact is nobody is born with the natural skill to lead... it's something that is learned through practise. An effective leader can be a man OR a woman; because leadership cannot and should not be defined in terms of gender. In fact, a common example of gender discrimination regarding leadership is when boys are told they are natural leaders for having confidence, being assertive and directing a group – but when a girl shows the same traits, society tends to label them as "bossy." It's no surprise then those girls are doubtful of their capacity to lead – due to the many girl box rules we unconsciously observe and internalize.

Another major sign of true empowerment in young girls like you are to bravely challenge some of the assumptions society may have about female leaders and show them that leadership is about character and cannot be defined by gender. At first, you may feel judged or that you do not deserve to be a leader, but anyone can become a leader if we put our mind to it – that includes you!



## July | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like... CREATING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

Now, let's dig deeper into some of the other topics we explored last year, like communication and expression. This month week let's learn more about creating and protecting our personal boundaries – a term we use to describe the limits and rules we can set for ourselves within relationships. Boundaries are important because it helps us build the strength and courage to move away from and be clear about our limits with negative people and harmful behaviours from others. It also reminds us that as teen girls, even though we may feel powerless – there are in fact several things that are in our control. Like these for instance:



While it's important to listen to others when they advise or tell you to do something for your own benefits (like parents and teachers), there are people who may try to push you down for no good reasons... leaving you feeling unworthy or uncomfortable. It is during these moments that you need to create and express your boundaries. In fact, the diagram above helps you understand that we may not always be able to control what others do or say, but we can always be the boss of our bodies, personal spaces, and our own wellbeing – so that other's harmful behaviour does not have the power to pull you down. Some healthy boundaries you can establish for yourself is to say "no" without feeling guilty, taking care of yourself, not feeling responsible for someone else's happiness, and even taking steps to make sure that you are not stereotyped or discriminated just for being a girl. What are some other healthy boundaries?



July | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like... STANDING UP FOR MY FRIENDS

Whenever I watch TV or read certain books, I often come across stories or portrays that made me believe that friendships between girls are always rocky. For a long time, I used to believe that women are naturally jealous or hate each other because that's what most teledramas and stories talk about. As I grew older and was able to think critically, I realized that one of the reasons we grow up seeing such narratives is because society seems to be obsessed with comparing girls and woman all the time instead of celebrating our differences. Think about it, how many time have you watched a teledrama or read a book only to see common characters like the "bossy woman at office," "the crazy mother-in-law" or the "jealous sister"? These are stereotypes built as a result of patriarchal values in order to promote a negative image of women in general. A deeper look at our real lives will help you realize that such stereotypes are not true at all and that in fact we witness many sincere friendships between women. So, my point is, a valuable part of being an empowered girl is to stand up for each other.

Making others feel valued, be it at school, at home and even when hanging out is such a rewarding experience. If you notice someone being bullied, don't look away. Challenge harmful actions by showing up for your friends and peers who may be vulnerable in certain situations. Try saying things like "that's not cool," or asking them if they'd like it someone treated them in such a way. Sometimes, it can take only one person to stand up to bullying and harassment for others to gain inspiration from it and do the same. Standing up for your friends and peers does not always have to be done directly. Even simply refusing to partake in unfair or harmful situations, you send a strong message to others that bullying, mistreatment and harassment should never be tolerated or supported. Let's think of some simple but impactful ways we can show up and truly stand up on behalf of others...when we stand in solidarity it's more easier to challenge the girl box. This has a lot to do with our collective power discussed earlier.





## August | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like... DREAMING BIG AND HAVING GOALS

Have you had really big dreams of achieving some day? This could be something you'd like to experience in life or achieve when you're older. Truth is, we all have big dreams and goals that as we grow, it helps keep us motivated and hopeful and truly gives our life journey more meaning. Being a teen can be such an exciting time in your life because it feels like the opportunities and future plans seem endless. But often, you may find that girls, especially try to reduce their goals because the girl box tells us that we don't deserve it or that we are not good enough, for it should only limit to becoming a good wife and a good mother. These voices in your head can really mess with your self-esteem and affect so many of the big plans and goals you've always had a bright young kid. Remember how we spoke of gender stereotypes earlier? Gender stereotypes can affect what kind of choices or opportunities we take because most of us feel limited by the ways girls are supposed to act. For example, I remember how I wanted to be a mechanic when I was younger but whenever someone asked me "Duwa, what do you want to be when you grow up?" at family gatherings, they'd laugh because it's not supposed to be a job that girls do. These stereotypes make no sense especially when you realize that the skills needed for any job depend on our will, hard work and character - and nothing to do with our gender.

So, I hope you dream big and have goals because there's nothing that girls cannot do if they put their mind to it. It's also important to keep in mind that it's normal for us change who we want to become as we grow older. You may have plans to be a teacher when you were younger, but now your new ambition would be to become a scientist, for example - changing your dreams and goals are completely normal and if you no longer want to strive for something, it's ok to stop doing it. Something my teacher always told me when I was younger, was that we simply cannot wish to become someone by sitting there... it's important for all young girls to work hard and start making small goals and plans to help us get to that dream destination some day! Over the next few days, some of these guiding questions may help you reflect deeper on this topic.

- What do you feel holds you back from envisioning your best future self?
- What have you always wished you could do?
- How can I make my dreams a reality? What steps can I take?





## August | Week 3-4

# Empowerment looks like...

## PROMOTING TEAMWORK

Have you had times when you hated working in a group or just couldn't seem to achieve a common task easily? We've all had similar experiences. The challenges that come with working as a team can include clashes in opinion, less engagement from some members, different personalities, lack of clarity the assigned task, and even competition arising from within a group of people or even lack of trust or respect for each other. Although teamwork can sometimes be challenging, it's one of those experiences that can turn out to be enjoyable if approached the right way! In fact, engaging in teamwork is the perfect opportunity for teen girls like you to get a sense of the real world of work and community engagements beyond our classrooms. When we're older, we need to have the skills to be able to work with people from diverse backgrounds and different personalities even if like to or not. In fact, learning to share, take turns, identify strengths of each group member and draw in other people to fill the gaps in teamwork is an essential social skill that all teen girls can benefit from. In fact, wouldn't it be so much easier if a bunch of people with diverse strengths work on one big task together instead of doing it alone? Not only does it make it easier for everyone since big tasks can be broken down into smaller ones, but it can also bring on a huge sense of accomplishment that we can share with other members of the team as opposed to celebrating alone! Some of the teamwork I have been a part of have also helped me find long-lasting friendships and taught me that we can never judge a person too soon because no matter who you are, everyone has a unique strength they can bring to the table.

Tell me about a time teamwork felt like a challenge. How did you end up resolving it?

What's something surprising that you found out about a teammate as a result of working with them?





## September | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like...

## GETTING BETTER AT PROBLEM-SOLVING

Wanna know something... one of the biggest dilemmas I had as teen girl is not knowing who to turn to whenever I had a problem that needed solving. I could ask Amma, but there were days when I felt too proud to ask her for help. Sometimes, I'd go to my best friend, but felt confused and alone when the problem I had to solve involved her. But the more I grew up, the better I got at learning to face problems in mature and intelligent way. Problems are a normal part of our lives, and they can occur at the most unexpected times in the most unexpected ways. In order to solve any problem, the first step is to identify or acknowledge that there is one in the first place. Ever had those moments where you felt tension between you and your sibling, for example, where you would go days without talking, hoping that it the problem will go away eventually. Once a problem is identified, it's important to focus on what can be resolved. Here, we need to keep in mind that smart people will always see the issue instead of targeting the person or emotion. The aim is to avoid attacking the other person and instead suggest ways to identify and solve the real problem.

A huge part of getting better at problem-solving is being empathetic. An empathetic person will not only suggest possible solutions to a problem but will also actively listen to solutions put forward by others. Sometimes, there may be problems that involve only you. For example, I've had moments when I thought that my life is so terrible that I will end up never getting into university and end up disappointing my parents. It is only later that I realize that the stress caused by school and peer pressure had led me to exaggerate my situation when in fact, it was a concern I could work on gradually to solve in small steps.



So whenever you feel overwhelmed and anxious, it's important to be still, take a breath, get some rest or engage in an activity that you enjoy and revisit the problem when you are ready to reflect on it or solve together with the help of a friend, parent or loved one. We can also try reframing our problems whenever they arise simply by changing our perceptions. For example, I remember always thinking "I had no friends" or that "nobody likes me" but when I took a step back and tried to rephrase it, I felt much better when I tried to see it in another way, such as for example how "Piyumi and Sachini are always there for me in class," or "I'm so glad I belong to the athletics team, they are a group I can always rely on."

So, let's reflect on these questions today:

what are some problems I eventually ended up solving? What would I do differently if I were to approach the same problem again?





## September | Week 3-4

# Empowerment looks like...

## BEING RESILIENT

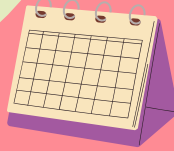
Here's a random mid-year reminder that you're doing great so far, and I am so proud of how far you've come! Being a teen girl today can be tough and exciting at the same time. Earlier, we learnt that girls can feel overwhelmed by the thousands of things expected from within the girl box, from performing well at school, helping with housework, making friends and fitting in, and dressing, talking and acting "like a girl." All these pressures from the girl box can worsen the more we try to interact with the outside world... such as being catcalled by men on the street, to getting teased by those boys at tuition class or even being held to a different standard in comparison to other men in your family such as brothers and their friends. This double standard between genders where boys seem to get more freedom or a free pass when they make mistakes can be confusing and anger-inducing at times. This is because of the unfair standards of behaviour related to masculinities and femininities. When masculine traits like aggression, dominance and control are applauded, it is often done at the expense of girls and women. So amid all these challenging circumstances and unfair girl box rules, how can teen girls learn to cope and be resilient so that we can continue on our journey of empowerment and eventually challenge these social flaws ourselves? How can we bounce back and return to our happy selves when life tries to pull us down?

The truth is that resilience is not something we can gain over night, but rather a series of small gradual steps and habits that you and I can include in our daily routines - and that includes exploring and revisiting some of the topics covered in this two-year journal. Even though we tackle few topics every month, it's okay to go back through these pages and re-read and reflect on them as many times as you need. You're in control! Think of these tips as individual steps in your mountain. In order to see the beauty from the top, it's essential to climb higher and higher as we go.

After all, true resilience comes from adopting an attitude that is eager to grow, learn from our mistakes and practise compassion both to ourselves and others. I believe in you and so does those around you and building up your ability to adopt but also resist where required!







## **All Brave Young Girls need.. TO CROSS THE BRIDGE FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULthood**

We've almost come to the end of our two-year journey together! Take a moment to pause and see how far you've come - I am very proud of how you carry yourself and learned from both your successes and failures. All these topics we've explored together are a sure way to help you cross that exciting bridge from childhood to adulthood the smart way. Over the next three months, we will go over a few other topics that are essential for all brave young girls as we navigate this equally challenging and exciting time. From decision-making to finding our identity - you've got time to learn it all while unlearning some. I am sure you must have realized that there had been many things that we gathered and added in to our lives while there had been many things that we had to leave behind.

So remember that you are in control of how you hope to translate these lessons and tips into actions as part of your daily life. With a little help from me and those who love and care for you, you're already on your way in stepping out of the girl box and facing the real world with courage and intelligence! Live demands bit more maturity now both in our thinking and responses So let's dig in!



## October | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like...

## UNDERSTANDING ADULT AUTHORITY

The older we grow, the more independent we get. Along with this new independence, also comes questioning authority and an unwillingness to obey every single command given by those older to us. This subject of obeying order and being compliant may get rather confusing or even annoying as time goes by. For example, we may wonder why our parents keep nagging for us to do small things, or push us to avoid staying out late. Most of these orders are done because they worry about your safety and wants what's best for you. In fact, having positive connections with trusted adults in your life such as your parents, teachers and mentors can be very helpful for your growth as you can always depend on them for advice and guidance during good times and bad. However, there is a special skill that all girls need to learn in order to navigate our teen and early adult years intelligently - and this is understanding when to obey and resist adult authority. Yes, you heard that right! In case you're wondering... "but Olu, aren't we always supposed to obey our elders and respect adults?" Turns out that while this common instruction you've learned as a young girl is very true, there may be some adults who may not have your best interests at heart. It's important to respect and obey most adults when they tell you something because they have once been a young person like you, gone through so many triumphs and challenges and can share their experience and wisdom with you. But as we grow and learn to think critically, it's important to understand the importance of questioning adult authority, to avoid wrongly respecting the authority of those who abuse or should not hold it in the first place. A great way to figure out if an adult giving you orders or exercising their authority over you is worth listening to and respecting is to identify if he/she is using their authority for the good of others.

You may also wonder: Why must I accept other people's authority in the first place? What if I want to be free to make decisions on my own? Understanding adult authority is also acknowledging that teenagers are not all-knowing... we are still at a very early stage in life and need guidance and help to succeed later in life. But I get it... teens require a lot of humility and maturity to accept someone else's authority and advice, especially if what is being advised is difficult or unpleasant. But if the adult giving out this advice is trustworthy, and does it because they care for you and genuinely wants you to succeed... it's worth listening to them!





October | Week 3-4

## Empowerment looks like... AVOIDING ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE

Remember the girl box we keep coming back to? A huge part of this girl box we are is the constant pressure to impress others, try to fit in and make new friends to belong instead of feeling like an outsider. As we grow older, we may even begin to get invited to social gathering or casual hangouts after school and class. During some of these hangouts, you may be offered certain things like beer, a cigarette or some funny looking pills if you happen to be hanging out with a questionable friend group. Parties where teens drink or take drugs can make our parents or caregivers feel very nervous because things can easily spin out of control. This is where it's important to understand the differences between teenage drinking and adult drinking. When girls and boys are age use substances, we often don't have anyone looking out for our safety. So if something goes wrong, there is a big change for us to fall in a lot of trouble and even face dangerous situations. If you've seen some adult drink alcohol at a family event, for example, this is different because they are surrounded by responsible companions and in a safe environment.

The reality is that many teens tend of misuse alcohol and drugs due to peer pressure and wanting to fit in. When this pressure to fit in kicks in, it can be hard to say no or refuse to partake in such activities, because you might be labelled as 'lame' or 'boring.' But there are easy tactics out there to refuse substances while still maintaining your cool, such as "No thanks, I don't need it" or "sorry, I don't drink." Someone who truly respects you will understand and back away but if they don't and proceed to teasing or bullying, that's a sign that you are in a space that does not respect your right to refuse. It's important to leave such situations as soon as you can. Now, you may be wondering, why is there so much talk about the dangers of alcohol and drugs... On the one hand, they can be very harmful for your health. Smoking for example has been associated with lung disease, cancers, and cardiovascular disease while other drugs can harm your organs, interrupt your blood flow and even result in strokes. Even though they may feel good immediately when consumed, the side and aftereffects they carry can affect you for the rest of your life... now who'd want to risk that? These harmful substances can even get in the way of those big dreams and goals because it affects our lifestyles and lead us to wrong paths. Remember, resisting alcohol and drugs does not mean you aren't cool, it just means you are smart enough to know better. Besides - there are so many different ways to have fun and feel good like chilling out with friends at a park, going on trips, visiting new places, and playing sports!





## November | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like...

## SMART DECISION-MAKING

Teen girls have to make so many decisions every day; from our plan for the next school term, to choosing friends and even dating. A core part of your empowerment journey is all about making responsible choices that may affect your life in the long run. I know how you may feel sometimes... that overwhelming feeling coupled with confusion over the task of having to select between two or more options. Sometimes, we may end up making the wrong decisions but drawing a lesson from those moments are what truly matters. In fact, even adults end up taking the wrong, or less ideal decisions all the time! But sometimes, teen girls and even women can have a hard time with some of the girl box stereotypes we grow up internalizing. Not only are women frequently seen as less efficient than men, but they are also sometimes even excluded from most decision-making spaces. Did you know that several studies have shown that women have a unique tendency to make empathetic decisions and are more likely to include everyone in the decision-making process? But society's double standards about men and women continue to exist - for example, if we take decisions that carry some risk, we are called careless and if we make less riskier choices, we are labelled ineffective. However, when men take similar choices, they are usually not labelled in the same way. If we wait for validation by these girl box standards, we might be waiting forever. So the trick is to dismiss society's assumptions and spend our time productively by learning some very useful decision-making skills to navigate our exciting teen years and get us out of the girl box by finally proving to society that girls can in fact be smart, brave, and beautiful.

Whenever you are faced with a decision, be it big or small, it's important to consider all possible outcomes. Personally, I love putting ideas on paper because it helps me organize my thoughts and ideas to come up with the most responsible decision. Once you have your options in front of you, it's important to take time to evaluate them carefully. Remember that difficult decisions do not have to be made alone... it's always great to have a trusted adult for guidance, and encouragement to help you make a good decision. Consider asking some of these questions when you evaluate: Is it unfair? Is it dishonest? Is it in line with the goal I am trying to achieve? When it comes to finally choosing a responsible option, it's important to keep in mind that the choice you pick does not cause harm or problems to anyone else. If you can go through these steps, you'll be able to make responsible decisions in no time. Remember that you in control of your life, so it's always possible to come back to the table and change or modify your plans or choices based on responsible and smart thinking.







## November | Week 3-4

# Empowerment looks like...

## DEALING WITH SCHOOL AND EXAMS

Dealing with anxiety caused by school and achieving good grades can be a very stressful time, even for the bravest of teen girls. In fact, the recent crisis caused by COVID-19 hasn't made things any easier. You and your classmates may have been forced to adjust to new routines and change traditional ways of learning. But while this new environment keeps changing daily, it's fair to say that the importance of education, and the role that exams play in your life, hasn't changed. School prepares young girls like you for the adult world you'll be stepping into and helps you learn valuable lessons that are integral to navigating everyday life. But teen girls in particular face a lot of pressure from inside the girl box to perform well at school and get good grades after exams in addition to the multiple other expectations society places on us, like helping with housework, caring for elders all while limiting our freedom when it comes to having fun. As much as it's important to challenge these unfair gender stereotypes, we must do so by reducing our stress and addressing anxiety at the same time. It's the least you can do for your body and wellbeing as a brave young girl about to step out of the girl box and into the adult world.

I helped navigate my school years and exam time by taking control of my time and routine, for example. Although I helped Amma with housework and taking care of malli, I explained to her that I need some time everyday to study and revise the day's lessons. But at the same time, I also know that limiting myself to a desk, staring at books all day isn't healthy nor productive. So I made it a point to take breaks by hanging out with friends, taking a walk or even engaging in a hobby to keep myself fit and reduce the lethargy caused by sitting all day. Dealing with exam stress and school also depends on recognizing what kind of routine works best for you. I have friends who are able to focus more by staying up late.. but I prefer waking up early or studying during the day because that's when my mind is most active. Whatever you decide, it's never a good idea to disrupt your sleeping cycle because poor sleep can really get in the way of a good mood and healthy body. I also love staying organized with to-do lists and organizing my day in a diary that I write on every day. Exams would also be a whole lot less stressful if you can find the time to go over the day's lesson everyday... it helps us remember the basics of every subject and prevents cramming the night before a test. Lastly, it's important to keep in mind that your grades don't define you as there is so many different elements that make you an important and whole person, but exams and good performance at school can still matter in order to get a good job or get accepted into university. So with a little but more work ethic, I am sure you'll be well on your way to success!





## December | Week 1-2

# Empowerment looks like...

## LEARNING FROM OUR MISTAKES

Reframing and rethinking your ideas and ways of thinking is another vital tool of empowerment that all empowered girls simply cannot ignore. This applies especially for that little thing called "mistakes" that we learn from an early age. Now, society's definition of a "mistake" might be very different from what us empowered girls understand it to be. That's because while many of us grow up understanding mistakes as an error caused in our actions that signifies failure, it is actually better understood as a chance to learn from it so we do not do it again! By learning to reframe our understanding of mistakes by seeing them as teachable moments, you can learn how to make the most of a bad or unfortunate situation by being courageous enough to adjust your goals, redefine expectations, refocus on your priorities, and feel more positive overall. In fact, as a young girl growing up, society tends to put all girls in a girl box and examine our behaviour more closely than boys.

Although both girls and boys are equally prone to making mistakes, girls may be judged more harshly and receive much stricter responses even for small mistakes. Sometimes, us girls are expected to maintain consistently good grades while it's generally considered "okay" for boys to slack off once in a while. Another example would be if girls behave rudely in public, they would be labelled with so many bad nicknames and judged negatively so fast. However, when boys behave the same way, society tends to give them a free pass because "boys will be boys." In fact, multiple studies have also indicated that women who work in traditionally male dominated jobs, such as the STEM (Science, tech, engineering, math) are judged more harshly than men when they make a mistake. So, as you can see, even the most basic empowerment dimensions such as learning from our mistakes... makes much more sense when we look at it from outside the girl box - because even society's definition of mistakes has a strong gender bias. Anyway, it's also important to remember that mistakes make us human; everyone makes mistakes throughout their lifetimes - no matter who we are.

Our teenage years especially might be filled with so many mistakes that you may make along the way; but the sooner you realize that there are essential life lessons hiding behind those bad experiences, the better your life will turn out to be, if you're willing to learn from them! Mistakes are much needed "building block" of both empowerment as well as learning and development. So this week, I encourage you to accept that all of us (yes, even the most successful ones!) are imperfect and that mistakes are inevitable in our life journey. With this realization, you will be better prepared to deal with mistakes and learn important lessons, so you don't repeat it next time. So next time a mistake happens, reflecting on these questions will help: What can I do to fix this mistake? Do I need to apologize to anyone? How will I prevent this in the future?



## December | Week 3-4

# Empowerment looks like...

## FINDING MYSELF!

At the beginning of this year.. we made an important promise... do you remember? It was to stop looking backward and start looking forward - A great attitude to have so we can stop wasting time over past mistakes and regrets and look towards the dozens of possibilities and opportunities waiting for us! The perfect way to conclude our journal reflections is to go over a very important element of our teenage lives and this is finding ourselves. But what do we mean by this exactly? To find oneself means to find a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives and reflecting on key questions like: what are my values? Do I have life goals... how do I achieve them? Do I act with intent? And what matters most to me? It's normal to not have concrete answers to these questions at a young age, but we all need to start somewhere and do actively seeking answers to some of these core questions will certainly help you find more meaning in your every day actions, choices and thought patterns. Although we've come to the end of this journal, it certainly does not mean that your empowerment journey ends here. In fact, empowerment can be a lifelong process of affirming and reaffirming who are in addition to standing up for our values. Here is a final list of reminders and affirmations to help you on your exciting journey!

1. Wake up every day with purpose and intent.
2. Everyday before you go to sleep, ask yourself if your actions today brought you closer to who you want to be tomorrow.
3. Be that girl who shows up for her friends and stand up for other girls so we can all step out of the girl box together
4. People will always talk negatively about others, no matter who we are. So don't waste too much time worrying about societal perceptions.
5. As you grow and mature, it's normal to sometimes lose certain friends, spaces and relationships. Instead of dwelling on the hurt or rejection, let's move on to bigger and better things.
6. Someone else's success does not mean you have failed. It's possible to be happy for someone else while cheering each other on. Strong girls don't compare themselves to others because we realize that each of us are unique.
7. You are in control of your decisions, your life and your actions.

Finally, I know that being a teenage girl is hard work - and you've done an amazing job so far! Your empowerment journey is just beginning, and it has been wonderful to see you grow into a young girl with a brilliant mind and a kind heart. May you continue on this journey by drawing inspiration from your successes and lessons from your failures - that is what true empowerment means, after all!



**Is there an area in your life that you really need support or help with? Can you think of ways to ask for help from someone else?**



**Write a thank you note to your body  
expressing gratitude for carrying you  
throughout your life...**

# My Personal Reflections

Highlights from this year

Things I am grateful for

Something I learned

Something I want to forget

People I am thankful for

# Goals and Plans

Things I want to accomplish




Things I want to learn



Places I want to go



Rewards for myself



Things I want to do more



