

# Valuing lived experience and dreaming big: how the GirlDreamer Advisory Board values women's strengths

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Authors: Emma Roberts and Marnie Freeman



## 1. Acknowledgements

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## 2. About asset-based Working

Asset-based working looks different in different contexts, but the core principle is that everyone has strengths, gifts or 'assets' that should be as a starting point for service delivery, community development and/or organisational development. Asset-based approaches are often contrasted with 'deficit-based' work which focuses on needs, problems and issues rather than strengths. This case study illustrates some examples of asset-based practice at GirlDreamer.

## 3. About GirlDreamer

Established by two young women – Kiran and Amna – GirlDreamer has a clear mission: to support the personal and professional development of young women of colour to tackle social inequality and pursue their dreams. The organisation strives for a more representative world by working with communities and companies to bridge the gaps that are causing a lack of representation. GirlDreamer seek to improve access to opportunity for women of colour at all levels across all industries. GirlDreamer provide opportunities for personal and professional growth through innovative programmes, resources and digital content. GirlDreamer is planning for all their activity to be digital by the end of 2021 to reach more young women and have an international impact.

## 4. About the GirlDreamer Advisory Board

Be warned! This is more than your standard 'Advisory Board'!

Unlike standard Advisory Boards, the GirlDreamer Advisory Board has an aspiration to influence beyond the parameters of the organisation. The Advisory Board is an opportunity for women of colour to have a space to try new things and a space to grow, all with a view to taking these skills to other spaces.

The co-founders of GirlDreamer have a strong vision to support women of colour to take up positions of leadership. The National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) currently support the Advisory Board Programme. A cohort of 15 women of colour are recruited to the programme for six months at a time. This provides board-level experience for 40-60 women of colour in total over the duration of NLCF funding. The GirlDreamer Advisory Board (The Board) provides strategic direction for GirlDreamer programmes and aims to inspire and nurture young women to take up leadership positions elsewhere.

#### Features of the GirlDreamer Rolling Advisory Board:

- A recruitment process where young women are asked what they can offer and what they would like to learn
- Recruitment includes an interview (which doesn't feel like a formal interview but rather an informal and authentic conversation) with GirlDreamer co-founders
- Selection of 15 Advisory Board members
- First sessions involve hearing the experiences and stories of the co-founders and facilitator....
- ...and Board members are then invited to 'Group Contract' some ground rules for how they would like to work together...
- ...they meet virtually twice a month. Every session begins with a genuine 'how are you' and the responses are varied and authentic. Everyone genuinely wants to know how each other are doing!
- Sometimes the Board are set specific tasks to support the development of GirlDreamer strategy and programmes
- Sometimes Board members discuss how they would like to develop and explore opportunities for growth such as leading their own workshops

The Advisory Board Programme empowers members to inform the GirlDreamer organisation in areas such as programme design. There are multiple impacts of the Board, the GirlDreamer movement benefits from the wisdom of the Advisory Board while Board members are able to develop their own skills which can be applied elsewhere. Down the line it is expected that other organisations will also benefit from the talented leaders emerging from the programme.

## 5. The journey

After operating for a couple of years, GirlDreamer co-founders noted that 2020 was a point of transition for the organisation, evolving from a relatively small organisation with a grassroots feel, to a more 'scaled up' operation. They were concerned that this period of growth ran the risk of 'detaching' the organisation from the communities they intended to serve and their initial vision for GirlDreamer. There was a risk that through growth, some of the 'magic' of their approach would be lost.

The co-founders decided to take a two-month break from operations to reassess their values and purpose. To some external audiences, taking a break was a surprising decision for an organisation who appeared successful. However, the co-founders recognised that investing time in themselves was the best way for GirlDreamer to move forward meaningfully. This was a difficult time for the co-founders and one they share openly with newbie GirlDreamers – modelling that vulnerability, making mistakes and trusting your instincts is a valid way to develop. Indeed, vulnerability, mistake-making and 'gut instincts' are considered to be assets and GirlDreamer leaders model this, weaving it into everything they do.

The co-founders describe this period of transition as a moment to ‘look back and check in’ with their communities to ensure that values are aligned:

*“it’s not a job, it’s – we see it as a way of life, and I think being on the ground and having those conversations with our community of GirlDreamers, just feels like, you’re just talking to a friend or, you know, someone you know really well. [...] I do believe challenges are a part of growth and a part of life” (co-founder).*

## 6. The practice: the building blocks of asset-based working

### a. Recruiting GirlDreamers to the Advisory Board

To become a member of the GirlDreamer Advisory Board women need to apply formally. The reason for this is twofold.

Firstly, it ensures that women who are ready to both contribute to and benefit from the GirlDreamer community are selected, they understand the principles of collaboration, responsibility and support required from Advisory Board members. This means that Advisory Board members are ready to hit the ground running because they feel safe and supported. Advisory Board members know that their ideas are valued and that a ‘can-do’ attitude has been nurtured.

*“...we are all doing amazing things, we have, you know, done amazing things and we’ll continue to do amazing things, and we have been invited to take up space because of all of that [...] I think that also adds to the psychological safety, somewhat, ‘cause it’s [being on a Board] just uncharted territory, for me, personally, but I’m sure for a lot of other people, as well” (GirlDreamer Advisory Board member).*

Secondly, the application process helps Advisory Board members to value the opportunity they’ve been given to participate. By going through this application process, GirlDreamers are more likely to value the position and show up consistently throughout their engagement as Advisory Board members.

*“...the interview process, and the questions that we were asked in the application form. [There’s clarity in] what’s expected of us in the fact that we do have to show up. You can’t have a place on the Board, and then not show up for any meetings” (GirlDreamer Advisory Board member).*

The application process involves a written application and an informal interview with the GirlDreamer co-founders, the Chair of the Advisory Board and the GirlDreamer professional facilitators. Having several members of the team involved in the interview process helps to build connections early in the process. Advisory Board members note that the formal recruitment process helps them to feel safe in the space because there has been an (informal) ‘assessment’ for like-minded individuals to join the Board. They believe this helps add to a trusting environment:

“...somehow, you trust also the other people they’ve picked to be in that community” (GirlDreamer Advisory Board member).

“... you trust that they’re going to choose trustful people” (GirlDreamer Advisory Board member).

The nature of the questions asked during the recruitment process is an opportunity for GirlDreamers to get a taste of the asset-based ethos i.e., valuing lived experience, identifying opportunities to learn and identifying skills to contribute to the growth of the GirlDreamer movement. Advisory Board members comment that the process of applying to being on the Board is vastly different to a standard Board or job application. This is because Advisory Board applicants feel seen, feel heard and feel whole – their strengths, aspirations and areas for growth are valued. It is as much about ‘what GirlDreamer can do for me’ as about ‘what I can do for GirlDreamer’.

What do GirlDreamers say about the recruitment process:

“...something they asked in the interview was, “What’s something that you want to learn this year” or “what’s the goal that you have this year?” For me, coming into this experience having looked at Advisory Boards or trustee positions previously. But there’s never that freedom to be, like, I actually want to learn something. And at GirlDreamer, it was, like, you don’t have to be perfect because you can learn it here. And I think that was something that made me feel so safe because I didn’t have to come and be like, “I’ve done this and I’ve done this,” and trying to make myself anything other than what I am. I could just come and be, like, “This is what I’ve got, I want to learn more, and I really feel safe to do it here.” That was a big thing for me. Just being made to feel that what I can bring is more than enough, and anything that – else that I don’t have, I can learn” (GirlDreamer Advisory Board member).

What do co-founders say about the recruitment process:

“...it’s not about churning out big numbers or lots of programmes, it’s about really investing with who we have and understanding why we do each thing we do. In return, we get incredible people that join us and it only makes our work speak volumes as it’s evident it comes from not only our heart, but the heart of our community”

## **b. Giving responsibility early on**

Advisory Board members have a strong sense of responsibility. This partly comes from the recruitment process whereby a sense of ‘prestige’ is attached to being invited onto the Board. Furthermore, when identifying Board members, GirlDreamer co-founders are looking for women with a mindset to champion and support other women. Critically, Board members are invited to make decisions early in their engagement with the Board. For example:

- The Ambassadors programme works with Women of Colour influencers to expand the reach and amplify the GirlDreamer message. The Advisory Board were tasked with designing this programme.

- GirlDreamer is in the process of becoming 100% digital and the Advisory Board designed the entire platform including features.
- The Advisory Board informed the development of the GirlDreamer merchandise and e-store including advising on marketing, investment and strategy.

### **Written task by Advisory Board member on responsibility**

Does being a GirlDreamer come with responsibility? ABSOLUTELY it does. Being a GirlDreamer means that we have the ability to affect womxn and girls that currently may not be able to recognize or have the resources to harness their own power. When we were brought on as GirlDreamer advisors, the one thing I remember thinking is that “wow, my fellow advisors and I are responsible for creating future generations of GirlDreamers”. But I also think it’s very important to make the distinction that we do not frame this responsibility as a burden. Often times, responsibility is something that someone feels that they HAVE to do and I think with the community we have, no one feels that this is a job. Everyone does this and is there because they truly support the cause and want to see other womxn succeed (written task, by Vaidehi Gajjar).

### **Excerpt from written task by Advisory Board member on responsibility**

By giving us the opportunity of not just being in a position of responsibility on the Advisory Board but giving us space to bring our skills, experience and ideas to the table. This gives us the message of “You are capable”, “We value you” and “We believe in you”. (written task, by Zachi)

## **c. Curating a sense of ownership**

GirlDreamer Advisory Board members report that they very quickly feel that the space – which at present is virtual – belongs to them. This is, in part, due to the recruitment process but also GirlDreamer leaders have a strong vision for the spaces they create and how they want young women to feel. They begin with the ‘feeling’ they want to create and work backwards to curate spaces (including meetings, programmes, campaigns) that contribute to their strong vision. Identifying and recruiting people into the GirlDreamer movement is a part of this process and contributes to a legacy of talent. This also allows for a very personal experience whereby the GirlDreamer founders get to know their fellow newer GirlDreamers as people.

 *“We love curating environments that allow people to thrive and to feel comfortable and safe, which I think are all very important things, especially for women of colour. And I think when our GirlDreamers come together, the best way to describe it is that the moment just clicks, everything feels like it clicks into place. I would say there is magic involved, because we want it to be unique, in the sense that our GirlDreamers couldn’t go somewhere else and have this experience. And it’s really amazing and magical, because it’s almost like being a Director of a film, like – so,*

*because we interview the GirlDreamers, who we bring on as members, or we bring on as participants in programmes and stuff, we get to know those details about them during the interviews” (co-founder).*

In an early session, Advisory Board members were invited to pull together a set of ground rules. Members reflect that this was a fairly quick and easy process but was important for setting the ‘tone’ of how the sessions will work.

“...we drew up, like, a ten-point plan of how to behave in the future meetings, and it was just so easy. I think we all collaborate really well. We all listen to each other, and because we’ve had that experience of maybe being the only minority in a meeting, not being able to speak up, that I think it’s evident here we’re all, like, giving each other turns because we know that experience of being the one that never gets asked oor opinion’s not valid. So when we drew up that ten-point plan, it’s, like, oh, my god, people think the same as me. We did that exercise really quickly. Whereas I think if it was with other people, I think, you might have to explain some things, and, so, I think, we all bring, like, that listening and collaborative skill, I think, as a strength” (GirlDreamer Advisory Board member).

What do GirlDreamers say about owning the space:

“I think the group contracting at the start of the journey is really important-that psychological safety. In [other] organisations, setting those ground rules, ‘This is what we expect; this is the culture; this is what we’re trying to do,’ and setting that intention from the start, and not just expecting it to, kind of, go that way, but being intentional about it, I think is really important” (GirlDreamer Advisory Board member).

What do the co-founders say about owning the space:

“One of the first things we do is create a manifesto to set the standard and tone for the programme. For us, the programme is for the benefit of everyone there and our job is to facilitate and host a space that creates the most benefit. In order to do that, we need everyone who’s choosing to be there to be invested in their own growth and the growth of their fellow members. An effective way we do that is to not dictate the ‘rules’ or ‘code of conduct’ ourselves, but rather, we give that power over to the group so they can be in charge, responsible for and accountable to each other for their space moving forward” (co-founder).



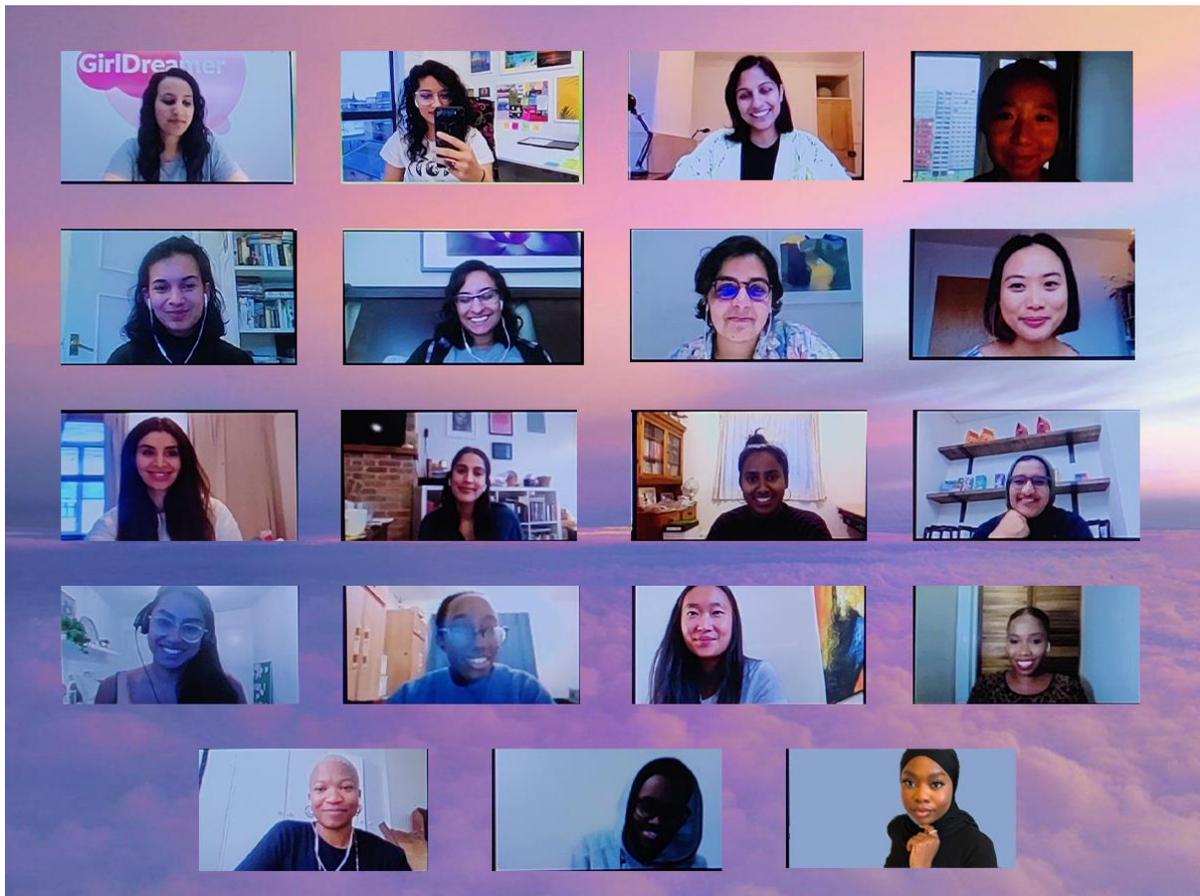
#### d. Asking open questions, active listening

Following on from the application process, GirlDreamers are continuously asked open-ended questions. This is an intentional way to encourage GirlDreamers to share their stories, embrace their lived experience and to build trust within the group. An example of the sorts of open-ended questions asked in this context include:

🗣️ *“What’s your name and what does it mean?” And asking that question, especially for women of colour, who have had experiences of people mispronouncing their names. I think it just creates such a beautiful environment, because not only do we learn the meanings, we learn whether, from their cultures, how you pronounce it, and it’s just – it leads into a conversation that could just go on for hours” (co-founder).*

This empowers GirlDreamers to taking space and feel seen and heard.

🗣️ *“Once you’re there, it’s, like, define it [Advisory Board] for yourselves, and that, I think, makes the community stronger because you feel ownership, and you feel responsibility, and you feel belonging, and you are even more incentivised to participate” (GirlDreamer Advisory Board member).*



### **GirlDreamer top tip**

“Our programmes always start with a ‘how are you feeling today?’ check in. We like to humanise the space as much as possible and take the time to listen to everyone. If it's a large group, we simply ask for a one-word summary of how they are so we can be conscious of time but still allow for everyone to speak. For more reserved people, this might be the only time they speak so it's important to ensure everyone has an opportunity to say at least one thing per call. In our experience, this simple tool leads even the most reserved people to become more comfortable in group settings and eventually, they can even become the most expressive! We also end each session, time permitted, to share one thing they're doing that evening or have coming up/looking forward to. Through this, we end up learning loads about each other and the group really respond well to this” (co-founder).

### **e. Hands on and hands off**

Advisory Board members note that the leadership team are both ‘hand on and hands off’. This describes the ways in which the Advisory Board are given freedom to shape the space, make decisions and work in ways that make sense for them. As well as having this freedom,

they also feel supported 'every step of the way' and value the approachable style of the organisation's co-founders, modeling asset-based working.

#### **f. The power of lived experience**

The GirlDreamer co-founders share their personal stories early in the process of the GirlDreamer Advisory Board. This is intentional. It sets a tone whereby Advisory Board members can relate to the founders, to each other and encourages a safe space for others' stories to be shared. Furthermore, it models the idea that lived experience is an asset, a strength.

GirlDreamer co-founders comment on the power of sharing their lived experiences, personal stories and vulnerabilities with other GirlDreamers:

-  *"...because we are the community, it feels so easy for us to do, because it's not us trying to understand a different background, or understand a different community, or a language, or – you know. Because we have lived it, and the lived experience just, kind of, oozes out. [Co-founder] and I both have such different stories and different pathways to how we met, and then when we met, and since then, we've been on this journey of understanding the experiences of women of colour" (co-founder).*
-  *"...I think for those who do bring their lived experience forward, it's their ultimate credential" (co-founder).*

GirlDreamer Advisory Board members value these stories and, in particular, the sharing of difficult experiences. This helps to build trust between the group and helps the GirlDreamer community feel that the co-founders might understand some of their life experiences. They remark that this is very relatable and a great way to 'kick off the programme' giving a sense that 'we're all in this together'.

-  *"...in their first session when they just told us their story – it just made them more human, and how they made mistakes, and their journey. You can admire them for what they do" (GirlDreamer Advisory Board member).*
-  *"...they were really open and honest about their story, their experiences, their life, and stories connect people. That was a great way to kick off the programme because it felt like we're all in this together and we matter. They're such incredible, amazing women, so, I found that really nice and really – yeah, I think that helped set the culture for the programme" (GirlDreamer Advisory Board member).*

GirlDreamer founders note that there is a marked difference between owning the narrative and sharing with your community (in this case, women of colour) in the spirit of openness and feeling pressured to share personal stories for funding purposes. Sharing stories for funding purposes can be undignifying and uncomfortable.

-  *"...it feels like you're with this begging bowl and you have to, with funders, you have to almost grovel and sell yourself and sell your story, sell your culture, sell the hardships, and always tell the hard story. So it's interesting" (co-founder).*

## 7. Things for other organisations to consider based on the GirlDreamer Advisory Board experience

- Could you invite your communities/participants to apply for a position of responsibility?
- Do people feel that their position / engagement with the organisation is special and prestigious?
- Would you (or members of leadership) feel comfortable sharing personal stories with your community? If so, how can this be done in a meaningful way without it feeling transactional?
- How can an asset-based mindset be modelled within your organisation by leaders?

## 8. Framework highlight summary

Taking each of the building blocks of the GirlDreamer Advisory Board, we have mapped them onto the framework for asset-based working (developed by Renaisi<sup>1</sup>). As our highlight summary illustrates, the building blocks of asset-based working do not fall neatly within the framework but, rather, cut across the framework. For example, the Advisory Board is both a decision-making forum AND a delivered programme AND has influence beyond the organisation. It is reassuring to see that through one programme – in this case, the Advisory Board – all four aspects of the framework are incorporated.

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<sup>1</sup> Renaisi as part of the Youth Fund Evaluation for Paul Hamlyn, 2019

Valuing lived experience and dreaming big

		How GirlDreamer put asset-based principles into practice identified through research		Asset-based working framework blocks			
				Decision making	Delivery	Operations	Influence
Young people	✓ ...are recruited onto the Advisory Board						
	✓ ...curate and own the space						
	✓ ...are asked open ended questions and feel listened to						
	✓ ...are given responsibility						
	✓ ...are supported every step of the way BUT...						
	✓ ...are given freedom in equal measure						
	✓ ...use GirlDreamer as a platform to make a positive impact on the world						
	✓ ....are nurtured and encouraged to dream big!						
Leadership	✓ ...check-in as the organisation scales – “is everyone with us?”						
	✓ ...share their personal story						
	✓ ...model asset-based working by sharing their vulnerability						