From surviving to thriving

Lessons on girls' agency in marginalized contexts

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LAAGA
LEARNING AND ACTION ALLIANCE FOR GIRLS' AGENCY
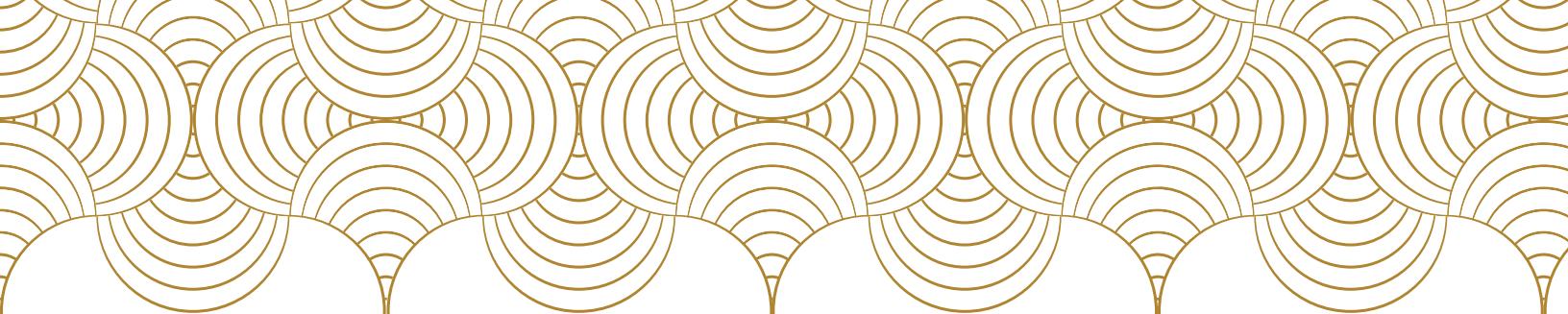
OVERVIEW

Young people today face complex challenges—the climate crisis and increased conflict, displacement, and political uncertainty—that intersect with historical injustices and legacies of colonialism, including gender-based violence and discrimination, economic inequality, ableism, and racism.[1] For hundreds of millions of adolescent girls around the world, these challenges present an increasingly urgent reality as they navigate intersecting forms of social, economic, political, and cultural marginalization.[2]

Research with girls in marginalized contexts points to the critical need for sustained, collective, and coordinated efforts to address the root causes of oppression and exclusion at multiple levels, shift social norms and power dynamics, and expand girls' ability to more fully exercise agency in their lives and in their communities.[3] Agency is fundamental to full and equal participation, emotional well-being, and improved outcomes—in education, in work, in relationships, and in life (see Box 1).[4] Agency can also be a generative force that moves us from reacting to actively creating our own possible worlds.[5]

Box 1. LAAGA's definition of girls' agency

Agency refers to a girl's power to identify and voice her hopes, make decisions, and take action to fully shape her own life and that of her community. Agency is a fundamental component of full and equal social participation and may require negotiating structural and situational barriers to create opportunities for exercising freedom.

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1   Barford, 2023; UN, 2018.
2   In our work, marginalization refers to social, cultural, and economic exclusion based on imbalances of power. LAAGA focuses on marginalized contexts to explore how girls navigate and experience intersecting forms of oppression and privilege (gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, ability, and more) as it helps to identify, examine, and address the systemic forces that girls may face within a given context (UN Women, 2020). Marginalization is understood as the result of forces that are dynamic and can be changed.
3   Kinyanjui et al., 2025; Mhongera et al., 2025; Siddiqa & Rosado-Viurques, 2025; Tran & O'Donoghue, 2025.
4   Friedrich et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2019; Schoon et al., 2021.
5   Sulkunen, 2012.

This brief presents lessons from the ongoing work of the Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency (LAAGA), hoping to provide insight for researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders who are committed to supporting the well-being of adolescent girls and their communities in diverse contexts around the world. It synthesizes three years of participatory, girl-centered research led by LAAGA members with nearly 400 girls and 500 community actors across five countries in Africa and Asia to illustrate the multidimensional, dynamic, and systemic nature of girls' agency. For girls in these settings, agency was practiced, exercised, and expressed (not owned nor given). It was influenced by girls' motivations, knowledge, and skills as well as by relationships and situations within specific sociocultural contexts. And it was enabled or constrained by policies, practices, resources, power relations, and, very critically, mindsets. Promoting girls' agency—in all its richness—thus requires leveraging opportunities and addressing barriers through collaboration and coordinated efforts across local and global systems. **If we want improved outcomes for marginalized girls and their communities, whether defined as well-being, thriving, development, or prosperity, we must transform systems with and for girls' agency.**

In recognition that this transformation must be done with girls and based on girls' experiences and understandings, this brief first shares lessons learned through research with girls and then lays out four guiding principles for researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and funders looking to center girls' dreams, voices, decisions, and active participation as part of a larger, intergenerational project of systemic transformation toward more just, inclusive, and participatory societies.
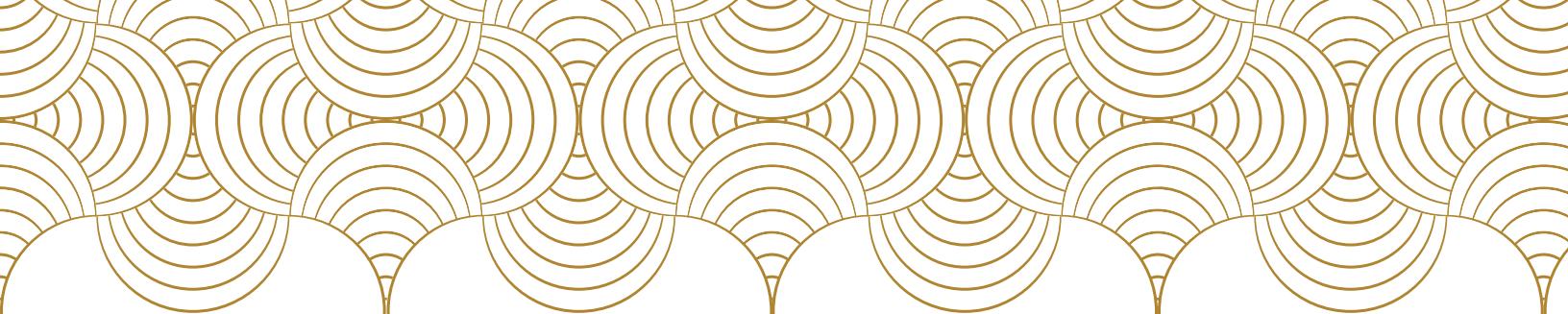
WHY FOCUS ON AGENCY OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN MARGINALIZED CONTEXTS?

Since the mid-2010's, amid rising global crises and deepening inequalities, the focus on agency has become increasingly central in global education and development research, programming and funding,[6] particularly in relation to adolescents.[7] As a critical transition period,[8] adolescence represents a window of opportunity for the development of skills and the modification of beliefs and aspirations about the future. But adolescence is also a time when young people take on—or are forced into—social roles that bring with them new expectations and responsibilities.[9] For girls, adolescence is accompanied by an accentuation of gender-based constraints,[10] with limitations often placed upon them with respect to key life choices around education and economic activities, domestic and care roles, marriage and parenthood, and participation in the wider world.[11]

For adolescent girls living in highly marginalized contexts, agency is lived as part of an everyday struggle,[12] as they develop aspirations, make decisions and take action in their lives while simultaneously navigating (and resisting) discriminatory and exclusionary social norms, practices, policies, and structures. Yet the agency of these girls and young women often goes unrecognized and/or is actively stifled;[13] narratives of vulnerability or disadvantage often depict girls and young women in these settings as passive victims in need of external intervention for their "empowerment." Agency-focused development programs are frequently guided by "universal" (i.e. Global North-based) and individualistic understandings of agency that may have little to do with local realities[14] or larger social structures and relations of power impacted by class, caste, religion, race, and gender, among other factors.[15] These programs can place the responsibility on girls to "lift themselves"—and their families—out of poverty, while relieving other actors in the ecosystem around girls (communities,

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6   While research on agency (and its relation to gender equity) has a long body of historic work that predates this, here we refer to a rising focus on "girls' agency" as part of global education and development research and programming as promoted by funders, development banks, international NGOs, and multilaterals; see for example, Gates, 2019; OECD, 2018; World Bank, 2014; JPAL, 2024; Sidle et al., 2020.

7   Adolescence is defined here as ages 10-19 per WHO, n.d.

8   Adolescence is recognized as a critical transition period, involving significant biological, cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional changes (Beckwith et al., 2024).

9   Jennifer Johnson-Hanks' (2002) work on "vital conjunctures," for example, encourages a move away from a solely biological framing of life stages to understand how life experiences are constructed in interactions between the individual and the social.

10   Kumar et al., 2021; Bharadwaj, 2024. While sense of agency in general increases during adolescence, research has found that the increase for boys is significantly greater than that of girls in this same period.

11   Edmonds, et al., 2020.

12   Khandaker, 2023.

13   Oyinloye, Mkwananzi, & Mukwambo 2023.

14   Edmonds, 2019.

15   Haslanger, 2024.

governments, funders, global development institutions) of their responsibilities to address structural inequalities.[16]

LAAGA came together in 2022 to delve into some of these critical questions surrounding girls' agency, seeking to better understand the policies, practices, relationships, and other systemic factors that shape girls' experiences of agency in marginalized contexts. Through participatory, girl-centered research with girls, their families, and communities, over the past three years, LAAGA members have co-constructed localized understandings of agency and co-designed actions to promote the agency of adolescent girls across diverse contexts shaped by structural inequalities, limited resources, and systemic barriers.

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16   Chawansky 2012; Hauge and Bryson 2014; Koffman & Gill, 2013.
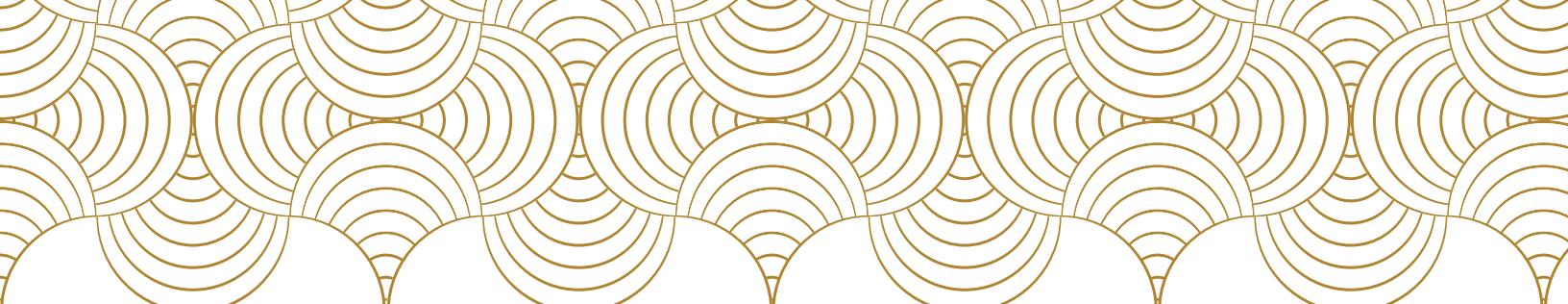
IN THEIR OWN WORDS: FIVE COMMON THEMES IN GIRLS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF AGENCY

One of the most important critiques of development programs focused on girls' agency is that they often overlook the reality that adolescent girls may have their own definitions of agency.[17] This section shares key insights learned in LAAGA's first round of research, engaging with nearly 400 girls and 500 adults in participatory, collaborative, and action-oriented methods between 2023 and 2025 in five country contexts: Bangladesh, Kenya, Uganda, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. This is not meant to suggest a universal definition of girls' agency, but rather to highlight the multidimensional, dynamic nature of agency in contexts of marginalization and the importance of grounding policy and practice in localized understandings.[18]

While the specific words girls used to talk about agency varied from setting to setting, girls defined agency in ways that reflected five common themes:

- **Freedom:** Being free to do what one wants to do, be who one wants to be, or to make one's own choices.
- **Identity:** Knowing, loving, and respecting yourself; taking actions to voice your opinions and establish your individual and cultural identity.
- **Aspiration and action:** Dreaming, identifying goals for your present and future, and taking meaningful steps to achieve them.
- **Courage:** Expressing yourself without fear of judgment, being confident in pursuing your goals, not being afraid to take initiative when something really matters to you; standing up for your rights.
- **Perseverance:** Working for your dreams against all odds and even in hard times, seeking help when needed, negotiating, and trying again and again.

The word "agency" itself did not always translate directly or hold the same meaning across languages. Through engaging deeply with girls, LAAGA research teams worked to uncover local words or phrases that reflected socioculturally rooted understandings and lived experiences of agency in girls' own contexts (see Box 3).

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17 Taft, 2019.
18 Edmonds, 2019.

Box 2. A note on LAAGA's methodology

LAAGA's research explores, with girls, what agency looks like to them, in their contexts, and in their own words. Research questions to date have focused on how girls defined and exercised agency and the individual characteristics, people and relationships, situations, norms, policies, practices, and other contextual factors girls identified as supports or challenges to their agency.

The research reported on here was conducted between 2023 and 2025 by four teams of LAAGA members with deep experience in, relationships with, and understandings of the local communities involved. While the specific methods varied from case to case, researchers across all settings used a participatory, girl-centered methodology (GCM) developed collectively and with the larger LAAGA network. This approach included a combination of school and community mapping, co-designed workshops, focus group discussions, proverb and sayings analysis, girl-led interviews, and self-reflection.[*]

To bring greater transparency, accountability, and relevance to the work, LAAGA members facilitated community dialogues, roundtables, and workshops around the research findings with the girls, their peers, and the adults they identified as key to their sense of agency. These convenings provided an opportunity to center girls' voices and experiences, consolidate localized understandings of girls' agency, and collectively name potential spaces, relationships, programs, and policies within communities that could or should be leveraged or transformed to promote girls' agency.

Throughout, LAAGA researchers used open-ended questions and worked with girls and their communities to arrive at their own understandings and their own terms in their local languages (with local interpreters to support when needed).

In total 383 girls participated in the initial research, with an additional 500+ students, family members, educators, community leaders, local and national authorities, civil society representatives, university students and researchers, funders, and media participating in follow-up community dialogues.

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[*] For a more detailed description of LAAGA's girl-centered methodology, please see O'Donoghue, 2025.

Box 3. Agency in girls' languages

Akemuken (Turkana): A woman who knows and speaks her mind even if this means going against social norms. She sets and achieves goals by remaining focused, working hard and negotiating barriers. She is a brilliant role model, economically independent, and a leader both at home and in the community.

Tính tự chủ (Vietnamese): A girl's autonomy to make choices in life; not just making decisions (tự quyết) but having the power to make choices about her own path, pursue her goals, and shape her future on her own terms.

Kurongeka (Shona): Having the strength and resilience to think independently, take meaningful action, and build relationships with others in ways that help achieve developmental goals both now and in the future.

আমার অধিকার (*Amar Odhikar*, Bangla): The genuine right of a woman to make decisions about her education, marriage, lifestyle, and career and to ensure her dignity in family and society.

FOUR LESSONS FOR UNDERSTANDING GIRLS' EXPERIENCES OF AGENCY IN CONTEXT

For the girls in LAAGA's research, agency was not an abstract idea; the definitions shared above came from their lived experiences as they practiced, exercised, and expressed agency in their families, schools, and communities. Their experiences of agency were multidimensional and dynamic, shaped by ongoing interactions at and across multiple levels from the individual and relational to the contextual and systemic (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The multidimensional nature of girls' agency in marginalized contexts

AGENCY IS...

individual AND relational

contextual AND situational

everyday AND extraordinary

skills AND systems

Lesson 1: Agency is individual AND relational.[19]

It involves recognizing oneself as capable of thinking and acting independently within a network of relations. When the girls spoke of developing, strengthening, or exercising their agency, it was for themselves and done with or in relation to others. In addition, girls' individual and relational agency was dynamic, evolving as girls developed greater skill, confidence, and social standing (that might come with age, education, or leadership roles) or as girls were seen participating (in family decisionmaking processes, for example).

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19   The relational nature of agency has been highlighted as especially relevant in the Global South (Aubel & Kapungu, 2024) and for marginalized communities and populations (Roest et al., 2023). This understanding goes beyond individualized notions of agency.

- Girls developed **aspirations** by looking around them, seeing what others were doing, and reflecting on what this meant for themselves: Who do I see around me? What do they do? How are they treated or how do others react to them? How do I want to be treated?
- **Decisions** were sometimes made according to girls' own knowledge and preferences, without seeking reassurance from others. When it came to "larger," more strategic life choices, however, such as those related to education, employment, or marriage and family life, girls felt more comfortable when decisions could be talked through and supported by their network of social relations. Exercising agency often meant reaching out to, negotiating with, and co-deciding with others.
- When **taking action**, girls consistently sought out people around them. They observed, they asked questions, they looked for information and guidance, and they practiced with others. They also identified when to advocate for themselves and when it was safer to take collective action.
- The **key relationships** for girls included those with family members, teachers, religious and other community leaders, as well as with peers. Relationships with family were pivotal for most girls, with mothers, fathers, sisters, aunts, and uncles—depending on context and family dynamics—described as playing key roles as "co-agents" with girls.[20] Peers also provided meaningful opportunities to share experiences, exchange ideas, and collectively address challenges. Indeed, peer relationships were seen as spaces where girls could amplify their (individual and shared) voices and advocate for change more effectively.

> **Key takeaway:** Girls dream, decide, and take action for themselves and in relation to others. As girls exercise agency, this creates space for additional agency, both towards their own goals and in their relationships with others. Girls and the key people around them need opportunities to grow their understanding, strengthen their skills, and expand space for girls' agency.

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20   Co-agency recognizes that a person's ability to aspire, make decisions, and take actions is influenced by and develops in interactive, mutually supportive, and enriching relationships where peers, teachers, parents/caregivers, and other community members become co-creators with girls. This conceptual understanding goes beyond notions of agency in which peers and adults play a supportive, but secondary role in a girl's development and expression of agency; instead, it posits a true partnership in which co-agents act with girls.

Lesson 2: Agency is contextual AND situational.

It depends on conditions within the broader environment, like cultural norms, social values, geographical location, or institutional supports, as well as on the particular set of circumstances and interactions that may arise within that context.

- The girls spoke of **contextual factors** that influenced their lived experience of agency in ways that varied across the four research settings. In general, when girls had greater access to social, economic, and environmental safety as well as certainty of basic services and developmental opportunities, they felt more able to exercise agency in their lives. The key contextual issues girls pointed to included:
    - » **Governance, security and community structures:** Types and levels of insecurity and the response of authorities to these; role of religion and/or civil society organizations within the community.
    - » **Economic conditions:** Poverty levels and livelihood opportunities; gendered economic roles.
    - » **Basic services and infrastructure:** Health and education institutions and opportunities; access to basic services like water, electricity, and connectivity.
    - » **Environment and climate:** Climate disasters and other effects of climate change.
- Within a given context, girls' sense of agency varied depending on the **specific situation. Power dynamics and relationships were key to these differences.** Agency was promoted when girls were "given a chance," when they felt free, safe, and supported and listened to by adults; agency was most stifled when girls felt unsafe, physically or emotionally. Girls felt most confident expressing agency in private or semi-private spheres like homes and classrooms and in "high-traffic" public spaces—like community wells or water taps, markets, and, increasingly, spaces presented by technology, like social media. They also noted that when they were afforded social status (formal leadership roles like church choir leader or being the oldest in a group or having greater access to technology) they felt an increase in their sense of agency.
- **Context and situations interact to shape agency.** Contextual changes, like a locust infestation that destroyed crops and livelihoods or the building of a new school in the community, created situations that constrained or supported girls' agency. The reverse can also be true. Girls and the adults around them shared how situations that favored fuller expressions of girls' agency, such as safe spaces to connect with peers, the welcoming of girls' opinions without judgement or repercussion, or opportunities to actively participate in community dialogues, were shifting the broader context for girls' agency.

> **Key takeaway:** Girls' agency is promoted by safety, certainty, and opportunities to dream and develop. Contextual factors can enable or constrain this, but even within the broader setting, the specific situation matters. Both contextual and situational factors should be leveraged to provide a supportive and expansive space for girls and their agency.

Lesson 3: Agency is everyday AND extraordinary.

The girls described how they expressed their agency and what this looked like in their lives and in their contexts. Notably, for them agency did not refer solely to "big," public moments or what might be considered "the right kind" of agency.[21]

- The girls provided examples that stretched across multiple levels—from the self to the community—and that ran along a continuum from the day-to-day to the exceptional.
  - » **Individual:** Choosing how you dress or style your hair; taking care of and respecting your body.
  - » **Family:** Mastering a recipe to make a special dish for your sister's birthday; advocating for your sister's education; respecting elders; mediating and resolving disputes; negotiating for your goals.
  - » **School:** Doing your homework; speaking up in class; getting a part-time job or starting a side business to pay school fees; returning to school after having a child.
  - » **Community:** Recognizing yourself and acting as a role model to others; participating in a community dialogue session; avoiding unsafe situations; questioning and challenging harassment and abuse of children and of girls.
- The expression of agency varied from girl to girl, and **what counted as extraordinary must be understood both in relation to a girl's development and in relation to the power dynamics** present in each context and situation. As girls saw themselves (and others) exercising agency, they described growing confidence to do so. In settings where girls said their voices were often silenced or where it might be unsafe for them to directly challenge or confront people, practices or policies, everyday expressions of agency became extraordinary moments of resistance.
- Girls identified people who they felt exercised their agency in extraordinary ways, like opening their own businesses, speaking out publicly against gender-based violence, or becoming a village chief or religious leader. These **agency role models, especially when they were women, were critical** to girls' developing understandings of what was possible and how to go about achieving their goals.

> **Key takeaway:** Everyday moments of agency can create space in individuals, relationships, situations, and eventually contexts for the ongoing and expanded exercise of ever "greater" agency. Extraordinary moments of agency expand girls' ideas about the possible. It is critical that efforts to promote girls' agency make visible, engage, and value all kinds of expressions of agency.

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21   Girl-focused development programs or interventions are often predicated on normative, moral or social ideas of the types of behaviors, practices, and outcomes girls in marginalized contexts should exhibit rather than young people's own ideas and priorities (Edmonds, 2019). A focus on desired public expressions of agency, especially those that follow Global North ideas of youth participation and voice, risk replicating hierarchies of what (or who) counts and what (or who) does not (Khandaker, 2023).

Lesson 4: Agency is about skills AND systems.

The girls told us that agency means bringing a diverse set of skills to play in setting goals, making decisions, and taking action. But they also made clear that skills are not enough, especially in marginalized contexts. Significant structural and systemic barriers shape girls' lives, making it difficult to exercise or even imagine agency without addressing the broader systems in which girls live.

- Girls identified a broad range of **skills, knowledge, and beliefs** that together promote agency. These fell roughly into four categories:
  - » **Belief in self:** Confidence, self-respect, and self-efficacy.
  - » **Setting and achieving goals:** Hope, focus, drive, determination, perseverance, negotiation, bargaining, and problem-solving.
  - » **Relating to others:** Respect for others (especially elders), communication, reading social situations, identifying and connecting with allies/champions, and solidarity.
  - » **Leadership and advocacy:** Accountability, assertiveness, courage, critique of discriminatory practices and social norms, and collaborating for collective action.
- Girls utilized, developed, and strengthened these competencies as they navigated, negotiated, and resisted **structural and systemic** challenges to their agency.
  - » **Poverty** was identified by girls as the greatest barrier to their agency and well-being and one that continually places them in unsafe situations. Poverty increased the insecurity girls faced, limited the support families and communities could provide, pushed girls out of school, and placed them in unsafe situations, including early marriage and transactional sex. Because of poverty, something as basic as having access to menstrual hygiene products could change girls' lives, trajectories, and futures.
  - » **Gender norms** often limited girls' agency by encouraging early marriage, gendered power dynamics, and the unequal distribution of labor (especially domestic and care responsibilities) in families. Gender norms also contribute to the prevalence of gender-based discrimination and violence that girls mentioned across all four case settings.
  - » Nearly all girls spoke of the **reinforcing effect of education** on their agency (see Box 4), yet inconsistent access to relevant educational opportunities was one of the primary systemic constraints they identified.

Key takeaway: Girls' competencies for agency grow through experience, reflection, and support, as girls and the people around them actively navigate the systems and structures that challenge their well-being. It is crucial that agency interventions go beyond a focus on individuals to engage girls—and their evolving skills, knowledge and beliefs—in intergenerational efforts to address systemic inequalities.

Box 4. A special note on agency and education

The girls LAAGA researchers engaged with had much to say about the ways in which educa-tion played a reinforcing role in their agency. Indeed, inconsistent access to quality education was identified as a systemic constraint on the development and exercise of agency by girls across all the contexts LAAGA worked in.

Being in school was reflective of girls' agency. In marginalized contexts, where poverty presents ongoing barriers to girls' education, being in school often means that girls have had to fight to be there, exercising their agency by setting educational goals, making tough decisions and trade-offs, demonstrating commitment and perseverance, and negotiating their continued educational trajectory with others daily, term by term, and year after year. Being in school was a symbol to these girls—and to others—a demonstration of their own agency, offering them standing and legitimacy in families and the community. They were people who should be listened to.

Being in school was also supportive of the ongoing development and exercise of agency. Schools represented opportunity, and were spaces where girls could develop their skills, voice their opinions, take on leadership roles, and build the self-confidence needed to navi-gate societal expectations. Schools were generally described as spaces where girls felt free from threats and had access to health services. Teachers and school administrators also offered girls additional role models and allies; educators who encouraged critical thinking, provided mentorship, and challenged traditional gender roles were identified as especially valued by girls. Some schools also offered expanded access to technological tools and platforms that connected girls to additional role models, information, and networks outside of their communities.

The girls and their families pointed to school fees as a key barrier to educational access and continuation and described the hard economic decisions families made around schooling. As such, being in school often came with the burden of knowing this might mean their siblings would not be or that their families would be put under further financial stress. Girls identified this as a primary challenge to their own well-being and to "getting through" school.* Even when they wanted to (and did) prioritize education, this came at a heavy relational and emotional cost.

*   Emily Markovich Morris and Millicent Adjei (2020) introduce the idea of young people exercising agency to "get through" to refer to the socioemotional work of grappling with the immense pressures of schooling for first generation students in the Global South.

EDUCATION PLAYED A REINFORCING ROLE

Being in school was both **reflective** and **supportive** of girls' agency.

Schools were spaces where girls could **develop skills**, **voice opinions**, and build **self-confidence** to navigate societal expectations.

Educators who **encouraged critical thinking**, provided mentorship, and challenged traditional gender roles were instrumental **allies for girls' agency.**

Within the school compound, girls felt **free from threats** and had access to **food and clean water.**

MOVING INTO ACTION: FOUR PRINCIPLES FOR TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS WITH AND FOR GIRLS' AGENCY

Each of the LAAGA cases synthesized here has a different entry point for understanding and strengthening girls' agency, yet they all tell a common story. Advancing girls' agency means **engaging actors across ecosystems—starting with girls themselves—to transform systems** that constrain girls' agency and limit girls' thriving (see Box 5). Importantly, this work must focus on education systems as well as the other economic, social, political, and environmental systems that impact girls' lives every day, especially girls facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and exclusion.

As LAAGA members move from research to action, our work has been guided by four principles for engaging with girls and relevant actors across local and global ecosystems (see Figure 2. Girls' agency ecosystem) to transform systems and outcomes for girls.

Box 5. On systems and systems transformation

Girls develop and exercise agency in response to systems: sets of interconnected, interdependent, visible, and invisible elements that interact within a given context to create a whole that serves a collective function and results in specific outcomes.[*]

- Visible system components: Policies, practices, structures, resources
- Invisible system components: Relationships, interactions, power dynamics, mindsets[**]

A systemic view of girls' agency highlights the ways in which elements in the systems that girls inhabit move in relation to one another. These systems are economic, social, educational, environmental, and so on, and create opportunities and challenges for girls and their families and communities. Girls in the marginalized contexts LAAGA has worked in, for example, described a constrained sense of agency when their physical or psychological safety was not guaranteed, or if they had inadequate or irrelevant educational opportunities. Girls' agency was also impacted by systemic issues that limited the agency of their parents, teachers, or communities, including poverty, lack of economic or livelihood opportunities, insecurity, ethnic, linguistic, or religious discrimination, or the impacts of climate crisis events.

Expanding space for girls' agency and thriving in marginalized contexts means transforming these systems because it will require addressing the root causes of the factors that perpetuate inequality and exclusion. Systems transformation here then refers to fundamental shifts in the guiding purpose or vision of a system, and then in how that system operates. This requires working with diverse people across ecosystems to address the multiple visible and invisible elements of a system simultaneously, aiming to create lasting change and equitable outcomes.

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[*]   Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022
[**]   Kania, Kramer & Senge, 2018

Principle 1: Center girls as co-creators of knowledge and drivers of change.

Centering girls as change agents in efforts to identify, analyze, and address systemic causes of exclusion expands space for girls' agency by engaging and strengthening their skills, knowledge, and beliefs; harnessing the power of the full continuum of agency, from the everyday to the extraordinary; and amplifying both individual and relational agency.

Since 2022, LAAGA has worked to bring this principle into practice through the development and implementation of its girl-centered methodology (GCM), a participatory and collaborative approach to research and action with adolescent girls in marginalized contexts.[22] LAAGA's GCM is a tool for adults working with girls to co-construct shared understandings and ownership of agency; the factors that promote or constrain its development and exercise in specific contexts and situations; and solutions that address challenges at individual, relational, and systemic levels. LAAGA's approach brings ongoing intentionality and an ethics of care to the dynamic and negotiated work of girl-centered research, particularly in marginalized contexts.

In this type of collaborative and inter-generational work, girls co-lead (and are seen co-leading) community-wide change efforts. Through the creation of community dialogues, LAAGA's work with girls has strengthened relational agency and promoted greater cohesion around the collective responsibility to girls' wellbeing, making space for deeper systemic and contextual change. LAAGA has begun to document, for example, how key shifts in local contexts can come from girls' mapping their own experiences with agency and sharing these publicly. When the girls have made their aspirations visible or publicly discussed the ways in which they navigate challenges like gender-based violence, economic insecurity, or climate change, they have helped to unify actors around shared understandings of agency, its challenges, and the urgent need to co-create solutions.

Moving into action:

- ❑ Use girl-centered methodologies to co-construct agency meanings and identify supports and constraints.
- ❑ Center girls and girls' experiences and priorities in community dialogues to promote shared commitment to girls' well-being.

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22   O'Donoghue, 2025.

Principle 2: Co-construct localized understandings of agency, challenges, and solutions

Girls' agency is contextual and relational, making it critical that understandings of agency be developed by actors living within specific sociocultural realities.[23] While LAAGA researchers found that girls faced similar systemic challenges across settings, these have unique context-informed dynamics and historical legacies, making localized understandings essential for relevant and sustainable solutions.

For LAAGA the first step towards this, as above, has been engaging girls to develop meaning grounded in their lived realities and in their own languages. These definitions and experiences were then brought to community dialogues and other follow-on meetings that have engaged diverse local and national actors in a process of collectively identifying nascent spaces and relationships for agency. Across five countries, in every context where LAAGA is working, girls and their communities have been able to identify places to get started. These include using existing communal gathering spaces to bring girls together in "agency clubs," engaging university students or teachers as agency champions, training girls to organize peers to address issues in their communities, connecting with local media to amplify girls' voices and lived experiences, encouraging an international program for women's economic development to include daughters, and reforming curriculum as part of a nationwide social development policy. These entry points are becoming leverage points for girls and the people around them to transform practices, policies, relationships, the distribution of resources, power dynamics, and mindsets.

For LAAGA members, these co-construction processes have shifted the nature of these change efforts. They are not trying to convince people to do something additional or external, which can be received as a burden, but have instead invited key actors to reflect on what they are already doing and how this could be leveraged or adjusted to advance girls' agency and well-being. These collaborative, co-constructed processes are creating space for dynamic and evolving understandings of agency and of what it takes to move from the idea of agency into action.

> **Moving into action:**
>
> ❑ Build off girls' understandings to collectively identify solutions in intergenerational spaces.
> ❑ Invite key actors to reflect on what is already being done and how this can be leveraged or adjusted to advance girls' agency.

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23   Edmonds, 2019.

Principle 3: Strengthen ecosystems to promote girls' agency

Engaging actors across ecosystems is fundamental for advancing girls' agency and well-being. First, because agency is relational, there is a critical need to identify champions and strengthen networks for girls' agency. Second, systemic transformation depends on the actions of many diverse actors, who all have a role to play in more effectively promoting girls' agency (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Girls' agency ecosystem
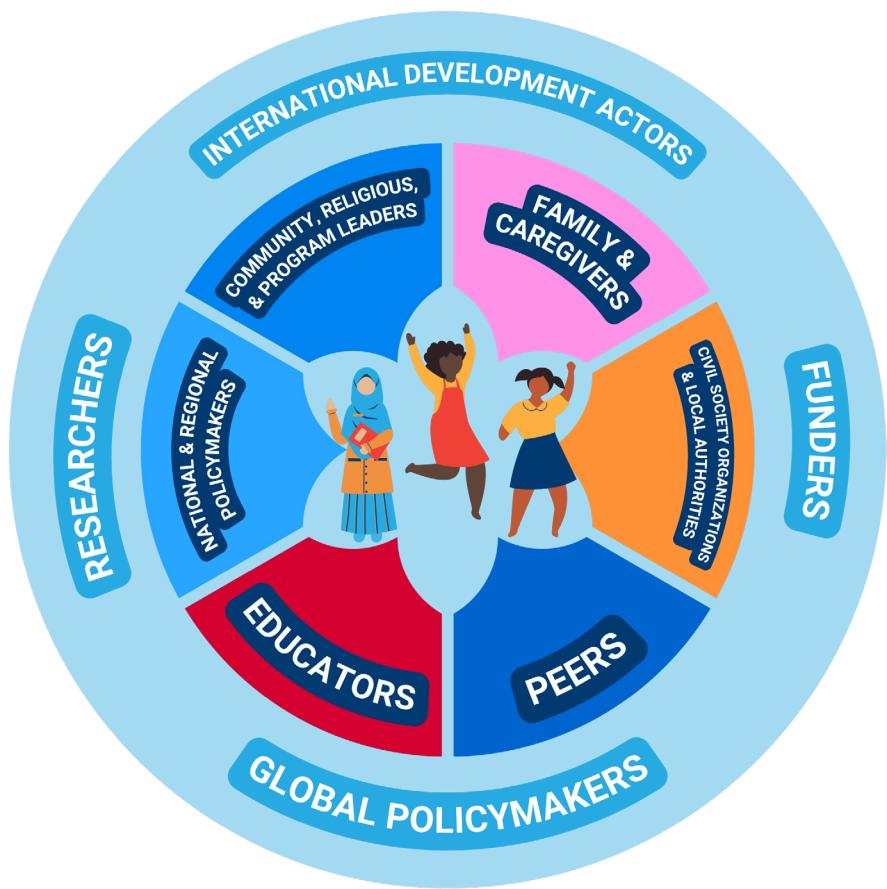
LAAGA's efforts to strengthen ecosystems for girls' agency start with key questions to assess the level of cohesion, commitment, and capacity ("the 3 Cs"):[24]

1. Is there a clear and shared understanding of girls' agency and what is needed to promote it? What would help strengthen this?
2. Do relevant actors want to promote girls' agency? What would motivate them?
3. Are relevant actors able to promote girls' agency? What would help them do it?

24   The 3 Cs framework has been developed by colleagues at the Center for Universal Education in partnership with the Knowing-Doing Network. Please see: https://www.brookings.edu/projects/knowing-doing-network/.

That is, do actors across the ecosystem: have a shared sense of the change that is needed (cohesion), want to make this change (commitment), and have what they need to make it happen (capacity)?

LAAGA case leads have co-designed and are currently implementing "follow-on" pilots with girls and other ecosystem actors. These are sets of activities based on the initial research, meant to strengthen the 3 Cs for girls' agency locally by ensuring relevant actors have information, guidelines, opportunities to develop and strengthen skills, spaces for participation and collaboration, and opportunities to provide feedback. LAAGA members, girls, and key adults have co-created relevant tools like interactive guides, training and curricular materials, and multimedia products and have implemented workshops, trainings, policy cafés, public dialogues, and girls' agency clubs. Initial findings from these pilots suggest that cohesion and commitment are strengthened by centering girls' voices, stories, understandings, and realities in intergenerational spaces and conversations.

Moving into action:

❑ Assess the level of cohesion, commitment, and capacity to promote girls' agency: Do actors know what needs to be done? Want to do it? Have what they need to make it happen?
❑ Design activities and tools to ensure key actors have what they need to promote girls' agency more effectively.

Principle 4: Challenge inequitable power dynamics

For LAAGA, engaging with girls in marginalized contexts represents a commitment to justice with girls as they navigate and resist social, cultural, and economic exclusion based on imbalances of power. A key first step for LAAGA in challenging inequitable power relations, both among girls and between girls and the adults around them (including researchers) was to develop a girl-centered methodology that treats girls as experts in their own lives and values girls' experiences, knowledge, and perspectives. LAAGA's GCM also aims to remove barriers to participation in research[25] by working with girls in their own languages, in spaces that are comfortable and safe for them, providing transportation, food, drinks, and other basic supports like menstrual hygiene products.

LAAGA researchers have also tried to create space for girls to name and critically examine the systemic and structural factors (like gender norms, class, caste, race/ ethnicity, or other colonial legacies) that impinge on their rights and opportunities. In reporting back findings, the "big problems" girls name are not excluded from recommendations because adults have not yet figured out how to solve them.

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25   It is important to recognize that the work of promoting inclusion by removing barriers is ongoing and that there is still important work to be done; to date, for example, LAAGA research has had limited participation of girls with disabilities.

Within girls' agency ecosystems, LAAGA researchers have engaged with family members, educators, municipal, sub-national and national authorities, and the media to interrupt traditional gendered and age-related power dynamics by centering girls in intergenerational conversations where girls and adults share stories, reflect on experiences, and co-create actions to challenge generational barriers and foster solidarity. And in LAAGA's follow-on pilot projects, researchers have engaged girls and relevant ecosystem actors in the ongoing identification of emerging priority actions to support girls' agency. A key part of this has been thinking with girls and their communities about how to hold authorities accountable for basic rights to security, health, education, and livelihoods.

Moving into action:

❑ Remove barriers to girls' participation in research and action: Work in their languages and in safe spaces, provide transportation, and make sure basic needs are met.
❑ Center girls and girls' priorities in intergenerational conversations and actions.
❑ Call out the forces and systems that hold girls and their communities back.

CONCLUSION

This brief presents lessons from the ongoing work of LAAGA hoping to provide insight—moments of resonance and reflection, and even contradiction—for researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and funders who are committed to supporting the well-being of adolescent girls and their communities in diverse contexts around the world. We all have something to learn, something to do, and something to do differently to advance girls' agency, challenge exclusion, interrupt oppressive power structures, and move towards more equitable societies.

- For researchers, this might mean expanding our repertoire of methodologies to center girls and girls' knowledge and perspectives in more participatory and action-oriented ways.
- For policymakers, this might mean convening community dialogues as spaces to center girls' agency and well-being and collectively identify priority actions.
- For practitioners, this might mean creating opportunities for girls to build their agency networks by working on collaborative, systemic change projects or expanding focus to strengthen the skills, knowledge and beliefs of family members as co-agents with girls.
- For funders, this might mean investing more intentionally in efforts that engage girls with their communities to co-construct understandings and co-develop and implement actions that strengthen ecosystems and promote girls' agency.

Wherever we start, we will need to work together as part of a larger, intergenerational project of systemic transformation toward more just, inclusive, and participatory societies—not only for girls, but alongside them. Together we can engage the power of girls in marginalized contexts; learn from the many ways they express their agency; address the challenges they currently experience; promote the development of relevant skills, knowledge, and beliefs; and center girls as they dream, decide and take action, individually and with others.

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AUTHOR BIO

JENNIFER L. O'DONOGHUE has spent 32 years promoting education for more inclusive and just societies. As Senior Fellow and Deputy Director of the Center for Universal Education at Brookings, she leads the gender equality in and through education workstream and guides the Knowing-Doing Network. Her work focuses on network-based, collaborative, and participatory approaches to research and policy to transform systems, interrupt patterns of inequality, and ensure marginalized young people thrive. Before joining Brookings, she collaborated with civil society to shape education reform in Mexico and taught at the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico (ITAM). She holds degrees from Wesleyan, the University of Minnesota, and Stanford.

ABOUT THIS FRAMEWORK

This framework was developed as part of the collaborative work of the Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency (LAAGA) and draws on lessons learned from 2022 to 2025 through iterative and participatory applied research and action in highly marginalized communities in Bangladesh, Vietnam, Zimbabwe, and the Karamoja region along the Kenya-Uganda border.

ABOUT LAAGA

The Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency (LAAGA) is a community of practice composed of 25 leaders in gender and education, working in 15 countries across Africa, America, Asia, and the Middle East. LAAGA has grown out of and deepened the collaboration between alumni of the Echidna Global Scholars Program and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution. Guided by a vision of a world that values the knowledge and dignity of girls and young women, listens to their voices, and supports them in taking action to shape their own lives and those of their communities, LAAGA is working to co-create ideas and understandings on the development and exercise of girls' agency across diverse contexts. We are committed to translating these ideas and understandings into action, working alongside girls, their families and communities, educators, practitioners, and policy makers. For more information and to see our latest publications and events, please visit: www.brookings.edu/projects/learning-and-action-alliance-for-girls-agency/.

A NOTE ON THE USE OF PHOTOS

In keeping with LAAGA's ethical standards, girls were invited to participate in the public sharing of this research in ways that felt comfortable to them. Photos used in this brief reflect girls' interest and assent (as well as consent of their guardians) to be part of the sharing of the lessons on girls' agency they have co-constructed.

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