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# Perspectives on agency from adolescent girls in the Karamoja Cluster in Kenya and Uganda

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For adolescent girls living in highly marginalized contexts, agency is lived as part of an everyday struggle. Girls and young women make decisions about their lives, in conscious ways and foreseeing their futures, while simultaneously navigating larger social structures, norms, and systems. Yet the agency of girls and young women living in marginalized contexts is often misunderstood, unrecognized, underdeveloped, and/or actively stifled. Adolescent girls may have their own definitions of agency, and their own understandings of marginalization, making it vital that efforts to promote agency in marginalized contexts start with girls themselves.

The current report is our effort to do just that, as we share the results of two years of participatory, collaborative, and action-oriented research conducted by members of the Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency (LAAGA) with girls living along the Kenya and Uganda border. We outline the context of the Karamoja Cluster, describe our girl-centered methodological approach, share what we have learned from and with girls in the region, and propose priorities and strategies to mobilize actors to transform systems with and for girls' agency.

The girls in the Karamoja Cluster defined agency as the ability to be free to do what one wants or be who one wants to be. All girls strive to be seen as akemuken, someone who takes action to achieve their goals against all odds. This definition of agency highlights its individual, relational, and systemic nature.

- Self-belief, goal setting, leadership, advocacy, perseverance, resilience, and economic independence were seen as key characteristics of being akemuken.
- Girls' primary goal was to complete their education, and being in school was both reflective and supportive of agency.
- Agency was both supported and suppressed in different spaces and by different actors. Women, especially mothers, played a crucial support role, while sexual violence and harassment were key constraints.
- Poverty was identified as the greatest barrier to girls' (and communities') agency. Poverty increases insecurity, limits the support families and communities can provide, pushes girls out of school, and places girls in unsafe situations, including early marriage and transactional sex.

Collaboration and coordinated efforts are needed across local and global systems to address barriers and promote the individual, relational and systemic nature of agency. This means working with girls, their families and peers; educators and community leaders; activists and program implementers; researchers and funders; and politicians and policymakers to address, at a minimum, five priority action areas:

- Promoting the development of girls' knowledge, skills and beliefs for agency.
- Strengthening girls' agency champions and networks.
- Promoting youth connection and centering youth voice and agency in the community.
- Guaranteeing girls' health and safety.
- Ensuring economic livelihoods for girls, families & communities.

We hope this work will provide insight and direction for those who are committed to the wellbeing of adolescent girls and their communities in Kenya and Uganda (and beyond). We all have something to learn–and do–to more effectively engage adolescent girls, strengthen their agency to resist exclusion, and work together towards more equitable societies.

# 2. WHY EXPLORE AGENCY WITH ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN MARGINALIZED CONTEXTS[1]

Agency–or the capacity to recognize and voice one's hopes, make decisions about one's life and take action freely (see Box 1)–is fundamental to full and equal participation in society and key to educational achievement and improved life outcomes (Friedrich et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2019; Schoon et al., 2021).

Young people face complex challenges–the climate crisis and increased conflict, displacement, and political uncertainty are two examples–that intersect with historical injustices and legacies of colonialism, including gender-based violence and discrimination, economic inequality, ableism, and racism (Barford, 2023; UN, 2018). However, too few education systems around the world prepare children and youth to not only navigate these challenges but to be agents of positive change in their own lives, in their local communities, and on the global stage (NORRAG, 2023; OECD, 2018; Anderson & Winthrop, 2025). Agency can be a generative force that moves young people not only in reaction to challenging situations but also to constructively create their own possible worlds (Sulkunen, 2012).

### 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 involves recognizing oneself as capable of thinking and acting independently in a network of relations. Agency is individual, relational, situational and environmental, bringing a broad set of skills, knowledge and beliefs to play in situations informed by social and cultural norms that may bolster, allow or constrain its exercise in specific contexts. Agency is a fundamental component of full and equal social participation and may require negotiating structural barriers to create opportunities for exercising freedom.

1 This introduction, common across LAAGA's 2025 case reports, reflects the work of the larger group of LAAGA case study researchers, including: Christine Apiot Okudi, Ellen Chigwanda, Joyce Kinyanjui, Pamhidzayi Berejena Mhongera, Jennifer L. O'Donoghue, Mary A. Otieno, Atenea Rosado-Viurques, Kazi Nasrin Siddiqa, and Tran T.N. Tran.

Since the 2010s, agency has become increasingly central to global education and development research, programming and funding (see for example, Gates, 2019; OECD, 2018; World Bank, 2014). United Nations initiatives like Generation Unlimited and Generation Equality, launched in 2018 and 2021 respectively, are further examples of global efforts to center young people "at the forefront of creating a better, more equitable world."[2] The widespread focus on "building," "boosting," or "enhancing" agency has been particularly true in relation to adolescent girls (JPAL, 2024; Sidle et al., 2020).

Adolescence, defined here as spanning ages 10 to 19 (WHO, n.d.), is a critical transition period, involving significant biological, cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional changes (Beckwith et al., 2024). Adolescents take on–or are forced into–social roles that bring with them new expectations and responsibilities, and decisions made during these years impact young people's futures as well as those of their families and communities. For girls, adolescence is also accompanied by an accentuation of gender-based constraints, contributing to substantial deepening of gendered attitudes and challenges (Kumar et al., 2021; Bharadwaj, 2024). Limitations are often placed upon adolescent girls with respect to critical life choices around education and economic activities, when to marry and have children, and how to interact with the wider world (Edmonds, et al., 2020).

Adolescence also represents a window of opportunity for the development of skills and the modification of beliefs, expectations, and aspirations about the future (Ballard et al., 2022; Novella et al., 2018). Efforts to strengthen adolescent girls' agency in relation to individual knowledge, skills, and attitudes have yielded some promising results (Amin, et al., 2023; Erulkar et al., 2017; Kwauk et al, 2018; Sidle et al., 2022). However, evidence of the impact of girl-focused interventions on promoting concrete action–the exercise of agency–is more limited as they may not shift power dynamics in families, schools, and communities or address systemic causes of marginalization (Lwamba et al., 2022).

For adolescent girls living in highly marginalized communities, agency is lived as part of an everyday struggle (Khandaker, 2023). Girls and young women make decisions about their lives, in conscious ways and foreseeing their futures, while simultaneously navigating larger social structures, norms, and systems. Yet the agency of girls and young women living in marginalized contexts is often misunderstood, unrecognized, underdeveloped, and/or actively stifled (Oyinloye, Mkwananzi, & Mukwambo 2023; see Box 2).

Indeed, the rise in agency-focused work has been accompanied by calls to bring a critical lens to research and action on agency, particularly in how it has been employed in marginalized contexts. Overly individualistic understandings of agency, for example, may miss the ways in which it is embedded in families, learning institutions, and communities (Khurshid, 2015), which themselves are situated within larger social structures and relations of power impacted by class, caste, religion,

2 https://www.generationunlimited.org/our-work

race, and gender, among other factors (Haslanger, 2024). Efforts (and social narratives) that advance individualized versions of agency can place the responsibility on girls to "lift themselves out of poverty," while relieving communities and governments–the ecosystem of actors around girls–of their responsibilities (Chawansky 2012; Hauge and Bryson 2014; Koffman & Gill, 2013).

Perhaps the most important critique is that agency work often overlooks a critical reality: that adolescent girls themselves may have their own definitions of agency (Taft 2019) and that efforts to promote that agency should start with girls themselves. The current report is our effort to do just that, as we share the results of two years of participatory, collaborative, and action-oriented research conducted by LAAGA members with girls living along the Kenya and Uganda border.

### Box 2. LAAGA's framing of marginalization

From its inception, LAAGA has sought to work with "the most excluded girls," a group we came to refer to as "girls in highly marginalized contexts." In our first round of research, this focus informed our efforts to center girls living in high poverty, rural communities in the global south.

We chose to center marginalization in our framing to move away from narratives that depict girls and women as passive victims in need of help or protection or as dependents reliant on external intervention for their "empowerment" (de Wit, 2021; Estrada Ávila, 2023; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Unlike more commonly used terms like "vulnerable" or "disadvantaged," marginalization acknowledges the structural and systemic barriers that shape their experience, without diminishing their agency.

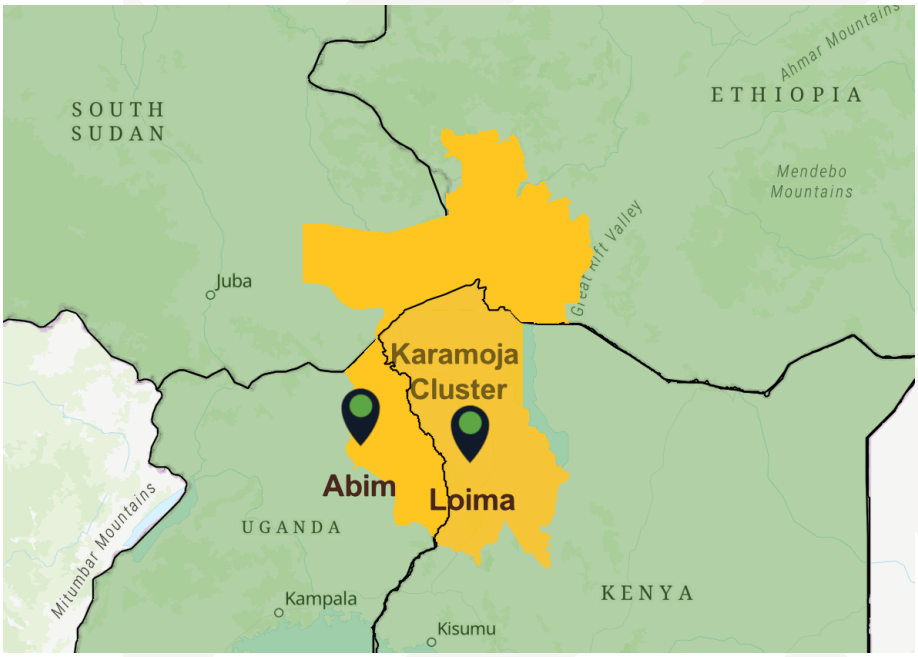
While the concept of marginalization is not free from critique (Varghese & Kumar, 2022), in our work it refers to social, cultural, and economic exclusion based on imbalances of power. We focus on marginalized contexts to explore how girls navigate and experience intersecting forms of oppression and privilege (gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, ability, and more) as it helps us to identify, examine, and address the systemic forces that girls may face within a given context (UN Women, 2020). We argue that marginalization is the result of discriminatory and exclusionary social norms, practices, policies, processes, and structures (Fluit, et al., 2024) that are dynamic and can be changed.

Understood in this way, marginalization challenges the notion that all girls experience exclusion (or agency) in the same way; instead, it urges us as a collective to ask: which girls, in what ways, and why?

# 3. CONTEXT: THE KARAMOJA REGION

This research engaged adolescent girls in the Karamoja Cluster (see Figure 1), a cross-border region covering southwest Ethiopia, northwest Kenya, southeast South Sudan and northeast Uganda. Comprising more than 13 pastoralist communities with ethnic, linguistic, and cultural similarities (Catley et al., 2021), most of the Karamoja *territory* is in Kenya while the majority of the Karamojong *people* live in Uganda. This case focuses on Karamojong communities straddling Uganda and Kenya, specifically in the Karamoja sub-region of Uganda and Loima Sub-county of Turkana County, Kenya.

**Figure 1: The Karamoja Cluster case site**




*Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, (c) OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community.*

The Karamoja region is characterized by arid and semi-arid conditions; insecurity associated with competition for land, water and other resources; intercommunal cattle raids and banditry; illegal but common use of arms; the presence of military forces on the Uganda side of the border; and high levels of poverty, child labor, and low educational attainment (Luvanda et al., 2024; Taylor, 2022; UNDP 2022). Insecurity has deepened a strong patriarchal system, early pregnancy and marriage, and sexual violence (UNDP 2022; Yeung, 2009). Amid a context of unequal distribution of resources, the political exploitation of ethnic divisions, and a lack of alternative livelihoods (Luvanda et al., 2024), men in the region have sought more and more forms of power assertion, status, and recognition (Stites, 2013; UNDP 2022).

LAAGA chose to prioritize its work in the Karamoja region in Kenya and Uganda to deepen its understanding of when and how agency is exercised within marginalized contexts, in this case, in a conflict-heavy border area that has been shaped by poverty, post-colonial social and economic policies, and patriarchal gender norms. Specifically, legal restrictions that constrain access to grazing lands across international and district borders[3] have made it challenging for pastoralist communities to survive in the midst of a climate crisis that includes frequent drought (HRW, 2007). Exclusion related to land grabbing, extraction of natural resources, and urbanization (Scoones, 2023) has been exacerbated by successive failed government policies, negative stereotypes, and stigma that have further marginalized the region, leaving it with the lowest humanitarian and development indicators in both Kenya and Uganda (Semplici, 2020; Luvanda et al., 2024). Four out of five residents in the region live below the poverty line, with 53% experiencing extreme poverty and two-thirds unable to afford the minimum required food consumption basket (Brown, Kelly & Mabugu, 2017; KNBS, 2019). In addition to the economic devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (ACTED/REACH, 2021; International Alert, 2021), the Karamoja region was invaded by desert locusts in 2020, causing significant crop and pasture losses that further devastated the livelihoods of these communities (UN, 2020).

For nearly three decades, area leaders have acknowledged the need for formal education.[4] Nonetheless, girls in the region face extreme exclusion from their educational rights. In the Karamoja Sub-region of Uganda, 4 out of 5 girls have not finished primary education, the lowest rate nationwide, and the adult literacy rate for women (16.4%) is less than half that of their male counterparts (37%; Karamoja Resilience, 2022). On the other side of the border, in Turkana County, Kenya, nearly 60% of girls between the ages of 6 and 17 are out of school; this is five times the average out-of-school rate for children living in rural areas of Kenya, and six times the national average (KNBS, 2022). On both sides of the border, only around one out of every 10 girls in the Karamoja Cluster make it to secondary school (Brown et. al., 2017; KNBS, 2022).

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3 Migration across borders is a key element in agro-pastoralism, as herders move their livestock (and families) between pasture areas in response to environmental conditions. Access to grazing land within and outside of the Karamoja region has been restricted by government policy since the colonial period; the imposed border between Uganda and Kenya is one example of this (HRW, 2007).

4 In 1942, Karamoja elders buried a pen and declared the "death" of education. In 1995, the pen was unearthed, giving rise to the community run program, "Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja", which was designed to engage pastoral communities more fully in formal education. (Unearthing the Pen, Maverick Television, 2007).

# 4. METHODOLOGY: EXPLORING AGENCY *WITH* GIRLS

This study sought to explore, *with* girls, what agency looks like to them, in their contexts, and in their own words. Research questions focused on how girls define and exercise agency and what individual attributes, people and relationships, situations, norms, policies and practices and other contextual factors girls identify as supports or challenges to their agency (See Box 3).

**Box 3. Research Questions**

What does agency look like for girls in the Karamoja Cluster of Kenya and Uganda between 14-19 years of age?

- How do girls in this community understand and define agency?
- What knowledge, skills and beliefs do girls identify as necessary to exercise agency?
- In what situations do girls feel free to exercise their agency?
- How do girls see others in their community exercising agency? How does this impact girls' own sense of agency?
- What do girls perceive as challenges to their agency? What do they identify as

We approached this research without predetermined beliefs about girls' understandings of their agency. The research prioritized a participatory, girl-centered, qualitative approach that included school and community mapping exercises, focus group discussions, proverb analysis, and self-reflection. Throughout, we used open-ended questions, not wanting to assume that girls would immediately be familiar with the term "agency," and worked with girls to arrive at their own understandings and their own term in their local language.

Purposive sampling was used to select adolescent girls aged 14 to 19 years in Loima Sub-county, Kenya and Abim District, Uganda. Sampling was purposive by community in Kenya and by school in Uganda (see Figure 2). In total 97 girls participated in the field-based data collection, which took place in the summer of 2023.

**Figure 2. Study sites and participants**

| LOCATION | NUMBER OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS/ COMMUNITIES | AGE RANGE | NUMBER OF GIRLS |
|---|---|---|---|
| Loima Sub-county, Kenya | 3 | 14-19 | 34 |
| Abim District, Uganda | 3 | 14-19 | 31 |
| | 1 | 17-19* | 32 |

**Note: Most girls who participated in the research studied in day or boarding schools; this community school readmits girls who have left school due to pregnancy so tend to be in this older age range.*

## School and community mapping

A mapping exercise was utilized to elicit girls' gendered experiences within the school compounds and in the community. This exercise was considered a girl-friendly way of facilitating a discussion around agency. Mapping, as a method, enabled the team to unearth girls' lived meanings of agency as they mapped out and then discussed their experiences, beliefs, and ideas about spaces in their school and community (Cochrane, 2018). The mapping allowed us to understand the social, economic, affective, relational, and spatial characteristics of environments where girls feel free to exercise their agency–and where they do not. (See Box 4 for more detail.)

### Box 4. Mapping girls' agency in Karamojong communities in Kenya*

Within each setting, we first divided the girls into 2 groups, those aged 14-16 and those aged 17-19. In each group, an average of 5-7 girls were selected. This separation created safe spaces for differences in how girls might express their thoughts and feelings at different developmental stages and allowed us to explore whether the experiences of girls differ based on age.

Each group was provided with a large sheet of poster paper and pencils and asked to map the school compound and surrounding community. The activity was highly engaging for girls, and they spent longer than anticipated (roughly 1-3⁄4 hour each), carefully adding in details. Upon completion of the drawings, girls were given colored markers and asked to shade areas on the maps that corresponded to (1) places in the school or community where they liked to be/felt comfortable; and (2) places that they did not like to be/did not feel comfortable.

As the girls drew, annotated and discussed the map, the research team recorded relevant information through note taking, audio recording and photography.

** Girls from boarding schools in Uganda did not do community mapping because they came from different communities.*

## Focus group discussions and proverb analysis

Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted as follow-ups to the mapping exercise with the goal of understanding the school and community maps and markings. This allowed the team to explore the research questions, co-generate meaning, and develop analyses of common experiences in relation to girls' agency. The FGDs used a social interaction process to explore the girls' attitudes, opinions, feelings, and experiences with agency. They were asked to explain their maps and the choices they had made about spaces that were comfortable or not.

Girls in the focus groups were also asked to suggest and analyze words, phrases, proverbs or sayings used in the community in relation to girls (for example, "it's a waste to educate a girl" or "educate a girl, educate a nation"). These discussions provided a lens for understanding the cultural beliefs, norms and practices in the Karamoja region that might support or limit girls' agency. This approach created space for participatory ways of researching with girls.


## Self-reflection

At the end of the mapping exercise and FGDs, girls were invited to engage in self-reflection, expressing their ideas, thoughts, and emotions in whichever way felt most comfortable to them (writing in any language or drawings/images). In this way, we hoped the research process would offer girls an opportunity to reflect on their experience and understanding of agency and the role it plays in their lives as well as share their feelings about the research process itself. The girls generally appreciated participating in this research, stating they had learned about agency, felt motivated, had "decided to continue with [their] education," and were now more eager to "go and achieve [their] goals."

In both the mapping exercises and the FGDs, data was collected through note taking, audio recording, and photographs. The recordings were translated from Kiswahili and Ng'aturkana into English in Kenya; in Uganda the discussions were held in English. Common themes were then identified and analyzed across the seven school and community settings.

## Community dialogues

To deepen the participatory nature of our research, foster accountability with the community, further integrate participant voices, and bring greater relevance to LAAGA's work (Dick, 2015; Kwan & Walsh, 2018; Patnaik, 2019), after our initial analysis, we engaged in a series of dialogues around the research findings with the girls and the adults they pointed to as impacting their sense of agency. In Uganda, this took the form of a symposium held in May of 2024 with over 40 participants. Organized in partnership with the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) Uganda, this all-day event in Kampala brought adolescent girls, teachers and heads of school, as well the district education officer and community leaders from Abim District (where the research was conducted) together with representatives from national civil society organizations, academia, and the Ministry of Education.

In Kenya, we organized a series of community dialogues in Loima Sub-County held in February of 2025, which provided the opportunity for the girls who had participated in the earlier research to discuss the findings, identify priority challenges, and explore potential solutions with their mothers and fathers, teachers, and local authorities; more than 110 community actors participated in these dialogues held over two days (see Appendix A: Community Dialogue Participants for more detail on participants). Finally, we facilitated a roundtable discussion in Nairobi with 20 members of relevant Kenyan civil society organizations, focused on strengthening cohesion, commitment and capacity in the sector to better promote the agency of adolescent girls in the Karamoja region.

These community dialogues reflected and reinforced the iterative and cyclical nature of LAAGA's research to action process, serving as a catalyst for the construction of actionable and sustainable interventions that are meant to be not only useful but also community driven (Ivankova & Johnson, 2022). Please see Appendix A: Community Dialogue Participants for more on these community dialogues, including details on participants. In the recommendations section we outline the community-identified solutions shared in these spaces.

# 5. FINDINGS

The girls who participated in this research defined agency as the ability to be free to do what one wants to do or be who one wants to be. That is, agency referred to their ability to identify goals and be able to take action to achieve them *against all odds*. We stress the last part of this sentence because it was critical to girls' understanding yet is often not included in dominant definitions. By describing agency in this way, the girls were bringing in an implicit understanding of the situational and relational dimensions of agency.

The girls in the Turkana region of Kenya shared a word used to describe a woman who exercises this type of agency–akemuken–and outlined the defining characteristics of such a woman (see Figure 3). Importantly, this word may be used to refer to girls and women, but not to boys or men. They were easily able to identify other girls and women who are akemuken in their school and in the community.

**Figure 3. Girls' definition of agency**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Akemuken** | A woman who knows and speaks her mind even if this means going against social norms. She sets goals and is able to achieve them by remaining focused, working hard and negotiating structural and social barriers. She is viewed as brilliant and a role model. She is economically independent and a leader both at home and in the community |

In the following sections, we delve further into: 1) how girls talked about what it means to exercise this type of agency (or be akemuken); 2) how they see agency exercised in their local context; 3) the relation of skill, knowledge and attitude development to this; and 4) the factors that were felt to support or constrain girls' agency in the Karamoja Cluster.

## 4.1 What it means to exercise agency: The freedom to set and achieve goals

The girls we engaged with said they are responsible for and exercise their agency mainly on things that directly impact their lives personally, like their education, health, and safety. They feel that they are akemuken in various contexts: for some of the girls this was in the village (in the market or at the community taps), while for others it was in the classroom or on the playing field at school. Girls identified these as spaces where they were "given a chance," felt free, safe, and supported and listened to by teachers and parents (see section 4.4 on page 19 for more). It is worth noting that the market was highlighted as a place that offered opportunity for girls to sell products and gain some sense of economic independence, which they also strongly tied to being akemuken.

A central part of these girls' definition of agency was related to goal setting and achievement. The girls were asked to remember a time when they had set a goal for themselves and how they had gone about achieving it. While the girls spoke of goals related to diverse aspects of their life, such as cooking or artistic expression, in almost all cases, their primary goal was education, particularly to change their lives for the better. They shared examples of how they had worked to achieve this goal.

> ***My parents paid my fees and ran out of money for my education after taking me through [grade levels] Form 1 and Form 2, second term. I decided to stay home and burn charcoal to raise funds for my school fees. I did this successfully and have been able to earn enough money to return to school and buy other requirements.***

> ***I had decided to attend a specific high school, so I worked hard, and my parents promised that even if there isn't going to be a chance, they would help me get to the school if I worked hard. I wasn't invited to go to the school during admission and I felt bad. However, I insisted that I wanted to go to that school, and I had to wait to ask if [I could] still find an opportunity. Fortunately, I did.***

They also described school generally as being a space to pursue other goals, get the support they needed to achieve them, and build courage to negotiate barriers within their families. In this way, being in school was both reflective and supportive of their agency.

For each girl, the first step in exercising her agency was to identify a desire she had and then to set about achieving that desire.

> ***I always wished to learn to make beads [for jewelry]. One day, I sat under a shade and began making my name [with the beads], and in the end, I was surprised that I could.***

> ***I wanted to know how to make Pilau so that I could cook it for guests who came home to enjoy a meal I cooked myself.***

Girls further exercised their (relational) agency by identifying others around them who had the skills they wanted to develop or resources they needed access to.[5] They then described cycles of observation and trying things out. All the girls agreed that it took many attempts before they could achieve their goals, suggesting perseverance and resilience as key elements of agency.

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5 We use the term "relational agency" in acknowledgment that the girls in Karamoja spoke of developing, strengthening, and exercising their agency in relation to others (and in specific social contexts). 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.

*I always wished to learn how to bake a cake, and I approached my Home Science teacher, and she taught me how to do it.*

*For me it was learning to prepare Ugali. Every time I prepared it would not be well cooked. I continued trying until I became perfect.*

*I wanted to learn how to bake cake, so I approached a friend to teach me how to bake. Sometimes, when there are birthdays, you can bake on orders.*

## 4.2 Expressions of agency in the Karamoja region: Intergenerational agency across multiple levels

The girls in this study provided context-specific examples of what the expression of agency looked like to them. What did (or could) they do that would show they were akemuken? This ranged from self-care at the individual level, to challenging harassment or being a role model at the community level (see Figure 4). Girls were also asked to identify ways in which they saw key women around them exercising agency. The findings from this intergenerational analysis across the two countries and among girls of different ages were largely the same and demonstrate how women and girls exercise agency across the same levels, but that this may take different forms, especially as women assume additional family and economic responsibilities (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Expressions of agency among girls and women in the Karamoja Region**

| LEVEL | WHAT AGENCY LOOKS LIKE FOR GIRLS | WHAT AGENCY LOOKS LIKE FOR WOMEN |
|---|---|---|
| **Personal/ Individual** | Respect their bodies. | |
| **Family** | Help the family and take care of siblings.<br><br>Respect elders.<br><br>Mediate and resolve disputes.<br><br>Negotiate in favor of their goals.<br><br>*"If your father wants to marry you off you can speak up and tell him that you want to complete your education first before getting married."* | Serve as role models and teach younger women household chores, like cooking.<br><br>*"While at home cooking, if the meal doesn't appeal she will make sure you prepare it well by guiding you."*<br><br>Challenge patriarchy by speaking up against early marriage for their daughters. (Some report their husbands to the chief and the marriage is stopped.)<br><br>*"If he wants to marry off a girl at a tender age, she will tell him to let her complete school first and negotiate about it."*<br><br>Stand ground in family decision making, especially when survival of family is at stake.<br><br>*"Over a drought period, livestock are moved to other places but sometimes the wife can confidently tell her husband not to move them because they will die over there.... A strong woman will defend her opinion and make sure she is heard."* |
| **Education** | Set and persevere in educational goals.<br><br>*"In terms of education, if she fails she should not give up until she does better by practicing more."* | Support daughters' aspirations, for example by paying school fees.<br><br>Intervene so that men will pay school fees for the children.<br><br>*"She will confidently tell the husband to do what it takes to make sure school fees are cleared even if it means selling a camel. She will not be silent until livestock is sold to pay school fees."* |

| LEVEL | WHAT AGENCY LOOKS LIKE FOR GIRLS | WHAT AGENCY LOOKS LIKE FOR WOMEN |
|---|---|---|
| **Community** | Question and challenge harassment and abuse of girls.<br><br>Recognize oneself and act as a role model.<br><br>*"I think about how I present myself because others will follow what you do. If it means wearing long dresses, you have to wear them because the others will do the same."* | Participate as entrepreneurs, especially to gain and maintain economic independence. For example, by selling vegetables and brewing local alcohol.<br><br>Intervene to challenge harassment of daughters.<br><br>*"If you have a brilliant mother, she will find the mothers of those boys [who harassed you] and tell them off.'"*<br><br>Act as community leaders full of compassion, patience, and persistence.<br><br>*"When a woman has power to talk, people listen to her."* |

Women who were identified as akemuken were seen as working hard to achieve their own goals and to support the goals of their daughters. The girls spoke of women exercising agency at home and in the community, where girls were able to see their mothers as progressive leaders. One girl said of her mother: "She is powerful because people listen to everything she has to say." Another mentioned that "when her mother calls others for a meeting or asks them to do something, they all follow it."

Although it may not yet be the norm, girls pointed out that women also exercise agency through leadership at the district or sub-county level and through local village councils or administration. In Loima Sub-county, they highlighted the very visible leadership of the woman Assistant Village Chief (who was key to organizing this research), sharing that she demonstrated that women could compete against men and win. In the Abim District in Uganda, women participate as leaders in all committees that govern the political, social, and economic aspects at the village level. The girls were very aware of these women councilors and their female Member of Parliament, whom they look up to as role models and people with decision-making powers. They see them as strong women who are confident, educated, intelligent, and able to make decisions at the same table with men.

They also look to these women to represent their issues to the highest level, to seek solutions for them: "The women MP has the opportunity to meet the president and so she should voice out our issues to him so as to get a solution."

## 4.3 Skills, knowledge and attitudes for agency: Self-belief, goal setting and leadership are key

After reflecting on these examples of exercising their own agency, and seeing women in their communities express theirs, the girls were asked to identify the personal capabilities–knowledge, skills, and attitudes or beliefs–that they believed were fundamental to their ability to make meaningful choices and act on them. They spoke of characteristics that fall roughly into three categories: belief in self, skills related to goal setting and achievement, and leadership and advocacy skills (see Figure 5).[6]

**Figure 5. Beliefs and skills identified as necessary for the exercise of agency**

| CATEGORY | RELATED SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEFS | IN GIRLS' VOICES |
|---|---|---|
| **Belief in self** | Self-confidence<br><br>Self-respect<br><br>Self-efficacy | *"If you have confidence, maybe you would want to sing, you have to believe in yourself."* |
| **Skills to set and achieve goals** | Hope and desire<br><br>Knowing what you want<br><br>Focus, drive and determination<br><br>Patience, perseverance and resilience<br><br>Negotiation and problem-solving skills | *"I know the importance of education, and I want to stay in school…so that I have a better life in future."*<br><br>*"You have to sacrifice everything else to achieve your goals. You must be desperate about that thing."*<br><br>*"She keeps doing something without giving up, even if she fails."*<br><br>*"If the father [of the boy who harasses you] is a drunkard, what do you do? So, the mothers negotiate and try to solve the issues."* |
| **Leadership and advocacy skills** | Courage<br><br>Critique of gender norms | *"[When boys use derogatory terms on her], she will question them courageously for addressing her like that…Face them and address them."*<br><br>*"She will not accept being married before completing her education."*<br><br>*"When people visit her to express their problems she goes ahead and informs others because she has power to command them."* |

6 These attributes align closely with previous research focused on identifying the beliefs and skills that make up agentic capacity (Gates Foundation, 2019; Donald & Hernandez-De-Benito, 2021).

Importantly, the girls also commented that additional factors such as economic independence or having a leadership position (in church, for example), were also critical to being able to more fully exercise agency.

The girls identified economic independence as a key characteristic of akemuken, some of whom were the girls' mothers, mentioning that they were highly entrepreneurial, selling vegetables or brewing local alcohol. This economic independence was said to give their mothers power to support their daughters' aspirations by paying school fees for them when the men refuse to pay, thereby protecting their daughters from early marriage. Indeed, all the girls who participated in this study indicated that it was their mothers who pay school fees. This economic independence most likely allows akemuken women to confront their husbands and other men in their communities, especially with regards to the education and marriage of their daughters, and to take on leadership roles.

## 4.4 Spaces, relationships, and practices that support (and constrain) agency: Safety is key, but not guaranteed for girls

Girls' agency in the Karamoja Cluster was felt to be both supported and suppressed in different spaces and by different actors. That is, girls' sense of agency in the Karamoja is both situational and relational; it is about spaces and the relationships they have with the people within these spaces.

The girls were very clear about the fact that for them to be able to exercise agency they need to feel safe. They described this safety as a free space, where information flows freely, where there is equality, and no discrimination, or verbal or physical abuse. They generally felt most able to exercise agency in spaces and with people that felt safe or helped girls to feel safe, and most constrained in settings or around actors that negatively impacted this sense of safety.

> ***I really hate being laughed at. I grew up in the central part of Uganda and so I am always picked on and laughed at. I will never forget when a teacher asked me whether I was a witch or prostitute as is said of people coming from the central region of the country. This has made me feel bad even till today. I will never try to be a leader because of this, I feel discriminated against.***

Although girls were able to identify spaces and people that supported them to feel safe and where they felt able to exercise agency, as we report below, there was no one environment that felt fully safe.

Before turning to an exploration of the situations and relations in the Karamoja that impacted girls' agency, it is critical to state up front that poverty was cited multiple times by the girls as the greatest barrier to their agency and one that continually places them in unsafe situations. This was true in our initial data collection in 2023, and it was the central theme of the community dialogues conducted

in 2024 and 2025. Poverty increases the insecurity girls face (Luvanda et al., 2024), limits the support families and communities can provide, pushes girls out of school, and places girls in unsafe situations, including early marriage and transactional sex. Girls repeatedly pointed out that because of poverty something as basic as having access to menstrual hygiene products can change girls' lives, trajectories, and futures.

> ***Sometimes when your mother tells you that she does not have money for pads, you go looking out for a boyfriend because you seem to trust him [to help you get what you need]. That is why most girls end up in early marriages.***

Given the extremely high rates of poverty in the region (nearing 80%; see Context section on page 7), it is critical that any efforts to promote girls' agency address in some way the economic hardships the girls' described.

### » Schools are generally supportive of girls' agency–with key exceptions

School was the most cited space where the girls reported feeling happy, comfortable and able to exercise agency. Girls spoke of safety in "high traffic" spaces at school, like classrooms, assembly areas, or staffrooms as well as in spaces where their basic needs were met, including bathrooms, kitchen areas, water tanks/taps, and dormitories. This stood in contrast to places where they felt uncomfortable in school, such as the school gate and near staff houses, which they associated with sexual harassment, violence, and physical punishment. Of interest is the gate area which was viewed by girls as being both safe and risky. The gate and the guards were said to provide security from warriors, but there remained a threat of being raped at the same gate.

School was described as a space where they were able to be leaders, make decisions on their future in terms of education, socialize and meet friends. They talked of not only learning in class but also getting advice from teachers, who provided them with information, listened to them, and guided and counseled them. Within the school, the girls reported being exposed to activities that supported their growth and aspirations, like music, dance, drama, sports, and games. It was also within the school compound that they felt free from the threat of warrior raids and early marriage suggestions by boys and men and had access to food and clean water. Some girls reported having been able to exercise their agency to come back to school–a safe space–after giving birth or after having to leave because of challenges paying school fees.

### » Community spaces offer opportunities–and challenges–to girls' agency

Girls identified places of worship, markets, and the library as spaces where they had freedom to speak, interact, make their own decisions, be leaders, and access information they need to make choices. Girls talked of having leadership positions in the church (for example, one research participant

leads a choir of 340 girls), and they reported exercising agency at the market because it provided economic opportunities that allowed them to have some control over finances.

> ***I go to the market and sell tomatoes. I also move around to see the different things people are selling and get to know the prices so that I can also trade in them.***

However, some girls identified the market as a place where they did not feel comfortable because that is where they identified "temptations," such as drinking and sex work, sometimes encouraged by their peers. The same held true for social spaces like pubs and dance halls.

At the community level, girls also felt uncomfortable near forests, animal grazing areas, and the main roads (including to and from school), primarily because of the risk of sexual harassment and violence from men. Particularly in Uganda, girls mentioned feeling unsafe in the hills and forested areas, stating *"the warriors come down from the hills as it approaches 7 pm in the evenings, so everyone must be indoors by this time."* However, government response to this insecurity–including the installation of long-range missiles in some of the hills and army detachments in communities–has only heightened their sense of discomfort.

Even in communities where insecurity is less dramatic, girls identified police stations as unsafe places, stating that the police harass their mothers and arrest illicit alcohol producers. According to girls, harassment by the police threatens girls' economic independence, key to the exercise of agency. In our follow-up community dialogues in Kenya, sexual abuse perpetrated by people in authority against adolescent girls was one of the main issues raised by girls and their mothers, who shared their experiences directly to the police commander and the district county commissioner. Most members of the community agreed that these and other cases of sexual violence were not "taken seriously" by community leaders or government authorities and that police took advantage of these situations to demand money to investigate or move reported cases of sexual assault forward.

### » Home provides safety and a nurturing space for girls' agency–for most girls

Families were seen as central to nurturing and promoting girls' agency. Girls who liked being at home expressed the joy of being together with their relatives, cooking and eating together, walking to and from the borehole to fetch water as they played and conversed with friends along the way. They also felt safe with their families, so long as they did not wander far from their house. Girls reported that they share their aspirations with their family members who in turn provide encouragement and support. Several girls, for example, described how their parents had supported business ventures they had started to make money for school.

However, one girl expressed her dislike for being at home because their village accommodates army barracks, and the soldiers coax the village community members to marry off their girls to them for food, supplies, and money.

> ***For me being at home brings trouble to the family because the soldiers say we deserve to pay them back for all the hard work they are doing to keep the Warriors at bay. So we should become their wives.***

A few girls felt that their homes were not supportive, especially where the parents and other family members encourage early marriage. In our follow up conversations with the communities in Kenya, girls shared that being in school often came with the burden of knowing this might mean their siblings would not be. As one girl explained, when she asked her parents not to marry her younger sister to an older man, her parents scolded her, saying, "if you want her to be in school, why don't *you* pay her school fees." Girls identified this as a primary challenge to their own sense of agency, suggesting that even when they want to (and do) prioritize education, this comes at a heavy relational and emotional cost.

### » Girls find key support people across all these spaces, with women playing a crucial role

Girls reported having support systems that included parents, especially mothers as the main breadwinners and caregivers, teachers, other relatives, chiefs and village administrators and elders (see Figure 6). Most of the girls stated that female family members played a significant role in their emotional and physical safety and, therefore, agency. Girls received protection from their mothers and grandmothers, as well as advice on safety and the prevention of early marriage and pregnancies. Often, the role of female family members is undervalued because it does not provide financial benefits, yet girls emphasized that the emotional and psychological support they provide plays a big part in supporting them as they strive to exercise their agency. As described above, they were the main support for girls to stay in school and get an education. In most cases, the suggestion of early marriage was said to come from male members of the family who were out to gain "bride price" from the marriage of girls.

While perhaps less a part of their immediate circle of support, women counselors and Members of Parliament, were recognized by girls as key role models and supports who make decisions and speak up for women and girls. Girls spoke specifically about the role women counselors have played in supporting safe return home after cases of kidnapping and defilement[7]: *"When they kidnap you on the road, the women counselor can go to the police and tell them to go to the home of the boy/man and they bring you back home."*

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7 Defilement is defined in Uganda as sexual intercourse with a girl under the age of 18. It is important to note here that the local culture acknowledges the kidnapping and defilement of a girl as marriage. If a boy kidnaps a girl, takes her to his home and defiles her, the next step is for the parents of the girl to come to the boy's home for payment of the dowry. In such instances, girls are generally unable to practice agency in terms of who and when they want to marry.

Figure 6. Summary of the agency support ecosystem identified by girls in the Karamoja


### » Sexual harassment and violence from boys and men is a significant constraint on girls' agency

Some boys were said to use demeaning and derogatory language to talk to and about girls (see Figure 7) and the presence of men was the main reason girls were afraid of the forests and hills, where most of the sexual harassment was reported to take place.

> ***So, this girl completes primary level to college level and these men begin to gossip [about] her, questioning why she isn't married. They plan to approach her when she goes to fetch water and harass her.***

> ***They follow the girl when she goes to fetch water and, harass her to a point of removing her clothes to prove whether she is a woman.***

Girls expressed that the name calling and sexual violence used by some boys and men demeaned girls, created fear, changed their beliefs and ideas, and made them feel worthless, helpless and depressed while destroying their self-confidence and self-esteem. Importantly, these are the very attributes girls identified as critical to exercising their agency.

> ***That is why you hear [girls] saying that they are afraid of the forests and hills because there you will be called all the bad names. 'Nakalai, even if I marry you, my wealth will be destroyed, you can't even take care of me. I even did well not to marry you.'***

***All these discussions take place in the forest amongst the drunkards. Then when you meet them on the road coincidentally, they throw these words on you.***

**Figure 7. Demeaning and derogatory language constraining girls' agency**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Nakalai** | A girl who does not know how to cook, care for a husband or a family. |
| **Nabuok** | Literally "elephant," this is a derogatory name meaning "dirty," used to insult a girl who refuses a man's advances. |
| **Apalalag** | A girl who knows nothing. |
| **Nadiwo** | A person who is intersex. This is used for a girl who consistently rejects men. If men find her in the forest, they will strip her to find out if she is intersex. |

Girls in Uganda identified a series of proverbs and sayings that diminished their sense of agency (see Box 5) and left them feeling angry, sad, and confused. One girl summarized her feelings as follows: "These words are discouraging and make one feel very worthless." Some girls mentioned that hearing these proverbs inspired them to do exactly what they had been told not to do, to prove them wrong.

Importantly, girls were also able to identify sayings that they felt promoted girls' agency; these sayings, which were more contemporary than traditional, point to the dynamic nature of language and its role in changing norms and behaviors.

## Box 5. Examples of proverbs and sayings identified by girls as influencing their agency

**Proverbs/sayings that support agency:**

- When you educate a girl, you educate a nation.
- Educate a girl, she will not forget you.
- Girls can do sciences.

**Proverbs/sayings that discourage agency:**

- Educating a girl is a waste.
- Educating a girl is educating a prostitute.
- Girls should not sit on chairs. (in reference to a tradition of women kneeling when talking to men)
- Girls should not eat oxtails because they will become big headed.

# 6. MOVING INTO ACTION: TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS WITH AND FOR GIRLS' AGENCY

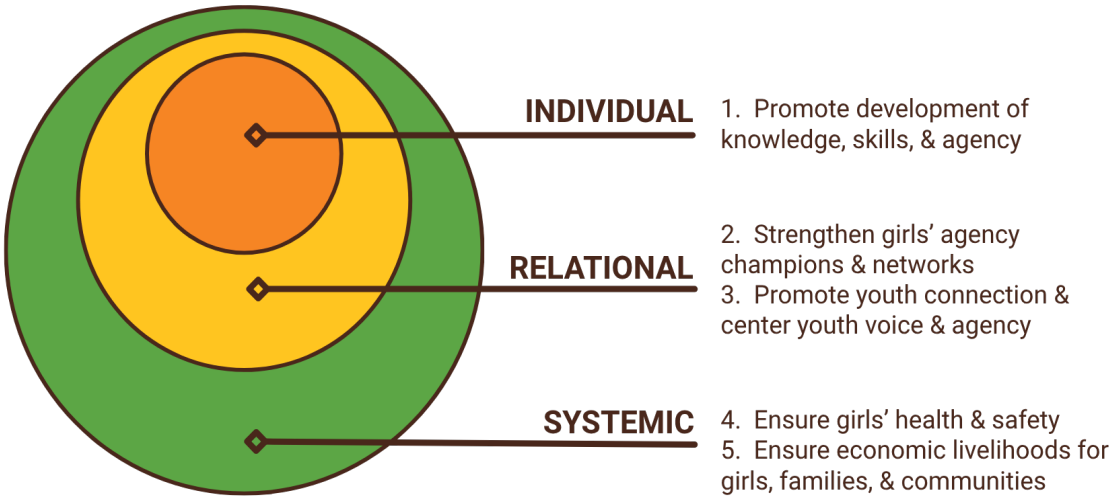
The girls we worked with in the Karamoja Cluster know what they want–to be akemuken, free to be who they want to be and achieve their goals against all odds. Yet girls' experiences of agency in the Karamoja are not only about the individual; they are also relational and systemic, as they–and the people around them – navigate, respond to, resist, replicate, and interrupt systems and structures, policies and practices, mindsets and social norms that expand or constrain space for girls.

Efforts to strengthen girls' agency in the Karamoja must, therefore, attend to these three levels, working with diverse actors across ecosystems to transform systems if we hope to address the challenges girls 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.

Through conversations with the girls, their families and communities, local authorities and educators, and civil society actors, we identified five priority action areas to promote girls' agency in the Karamoja region (see Figure 8). Together, these outline an (eco)systemic approach that highlights the need for comprehensive and coordinated efforts to address the individual, relational, and systemic barriers to girls' agency in the region. Girls will not be able to fully exercise their agency, for example, if they have inadequate opportunities to strengthen their skills or beliefs, or if their physical or psychological safety is not guaranteed, or if their parents' (or teachers' or communities') ability to support them is constrained by poverty and insecurity.

For this reason, the below list includes actions that can be taken more immediately, like training teachers or parents to serve as mentors or creating leadership opportunities for girls in schools, as well as those that may seem too "big," and indeed are beyond the scope of this study, like addressing insecurity or poverty. Centering girls' agency means creating space for girls to name the forces that lead to marginalization; we cannot exclude them from our to-do list simply because we have not yet figured out how to solve them.

Figure 8. Building multi-level support for girls' agency in the Karamoja region




## Priority actions to promote agency at the individual level

### 1. Promote the development of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and practices for agency among adolescent girls

Girls need opportunities to identify, develop, and strengthen their agentic capacity. At a minimum, this includes knowledge about their rights and opportunities, skills like goal setting and problem solving, beliefs like confidence and self-efficacy, and practices like self-advocacy and negotiation. Given the link girls make between economic independence and agency, this should also include financial literacy, entrepreneurial skills, and career guidance.

As the girls in this study identified, strengthening this capacity depends in part on their own determination, focus, hard work and resilience. But ensuring girls develop what they need also requires support from other actors, including families, educators, community leaders, local and national authorities, and funders to ensure girls have continued access to learning and leadership opportunities both within and outside of schools as well as to information and guidance on educational pathways, careers and livelihoods, and sexual and reproductive health.

## Priority actions to promote agency at the relational level

### 2. Strengthen girls' agency champions and networks

Girls look to others around them as role models, sources of information and guidance, and for emotional, psychological, and physical support and safety. Families–especially mothers and grandmothers–peers, and teachers provide key relational supports for girls. Boys and men must also be key allies for girls' agency, particularly given the high levels of gender-based discrimination and violence in the community.

Actions should be taken to strengthen the skills and knowledge of adults across the ecosystem to foster girls' agency at home, in schools, and in other community spaces. Parents suggested a collective approach to this: "the community needs to come together to support all children, not just our own." Girls and families identified the importance of making role models–like the female village chiefs–more visible, and for mentorship training for parents, teachers and other community leaders. Girls in particular pointed to the need for adults to be more open to the dreams and ideas of the younger generation.

As discussed throughout this paper, poverty and insecurity present formidable barriers to girls' agency, perhaps not surprising given the long history of failed government policies and exclusion in the region. Communities need opportunities to hold government (local, county and national authorities) to account. To provide just one example that came out in this research, community members took advantage of the community dialogues to question authorities about the lack of women in local police despite national efforts to increase the presence of women officers, especially to staff gender-based violence desks (SaferWorld, 2020).

### 3. Promote youth connection and center youth voice and agency across the community

The girls in the Karamoja need safe spaces to come together with other young people to play, dream, receive peer support and encouragement, and to collaborate to address shared concerns. Indeed, when asked what one action they would prioritize to promote their agency, it was this. Young people need expanded opportunities to be together as young people, to fight against a sense of isolation, to reflect on their personal and collective experiences, and to expand spaces for youth to speak up freely.

As girls importantly pointed out, girls and boys need spaces and time to be together, understand one another, and build a collective sense of future; they also need time apart. Inclusive and safe spaces should be created for adolescent boys to reflect on their own experiences, critically examine gender norms, recognize the value of shared agency, and strengthen skills, practices and mindsets to promote gender equity in the region.

Providing consistent spaces for young people is one important step towards centering youth voice and agency in community dialogues and decision-making processes. Additional efforts should be taken to connect these youth spaces with broader community processes.

## Priority actions to promote agency at the systemic level

### 4. Ensure girls' health and safety

Girls' need to feel (and be) healthy and safe to fully express their agency. In the Karamoja, this means guaranteeing basic services like water, electricity, and internet connectivity, as well as providing consistent access to menstrual health and hygiene products.

Addressing the complex and multidimensional insecurity present in the Karamoja Region (Luvanda et al., 2024) will require a comprehensive response that goes well beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight here that efforts to promote girls' agency in the area cannot ignore this reality and should work with girls, their families, schools and communities, as well as local and national authorities to design strategies to promote girls' safety. At a minimum, these should include ending corporal punishment in schools and families and preventing and prosecuting gender-based discrimination, violence, and sexual violence.

### 5. Ensure economic livelihoods for girls, their families and communities

It is urgent that steps be taken to address poverty in the region. As long as four in five families in the Karamoja struggle to meet their basic needs, girls will be unable to fully exercise their agency. Again, this is a systemic issue that will require comprehensive analysis and response, but at the very least, efforts should be taken by local and national authorities, civil society organizations (CSO), national and international funders and service providers to guarantee payment of school fees for all children, expand entrepreneurial and other economic supports for girls and their families, and promote alternative means of livelihoods and sustained economic development in the region.

## A final note on collaboration & coordination for sustained change

Working toward the priorities listed here will require coordinated efforts and collaboration at the local level within the Karamoja region, at national levels in Kenya and Uganda, and with global actors. Any future action to promote girls' agency in the Karamoja should build upon efforts already in place, especially those supported by local leaders and the variety of CSO's currently working in the region. However, while CSO-driven efforts are underway that address key aspects of all five action areas (see Appendix B. Action Areas), a significant gap remains. More comprehensive, multisectoral, and coordinated approaches are needed to build the commitment, capacity and cohesion across girls' ecosystems that can catalyze systemic and sustained change. This would require strengthened partnerships among actors engaging in this work in the Karamoja to map out existing efforts, pool resources, share research and learning, co-develop tools, and create spaces for community dialogues on key issues related to girls' wellbeing and agency.

Finally, as adults move into action in support of girls, we must remember that girls–and their dreams, decisions, and actions–must take center stage and lead the way forward.

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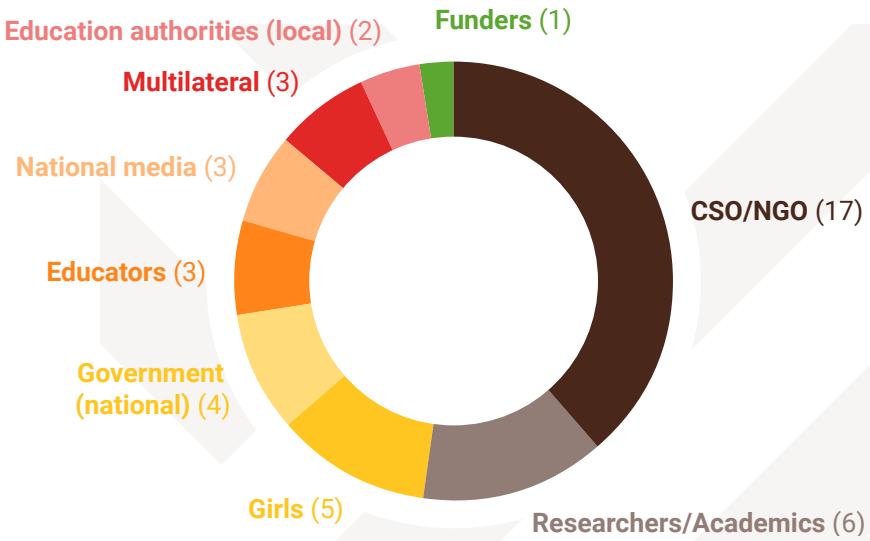
# APPENDIX A: COMMUNITY DIALOGUE PARTICIPANTS

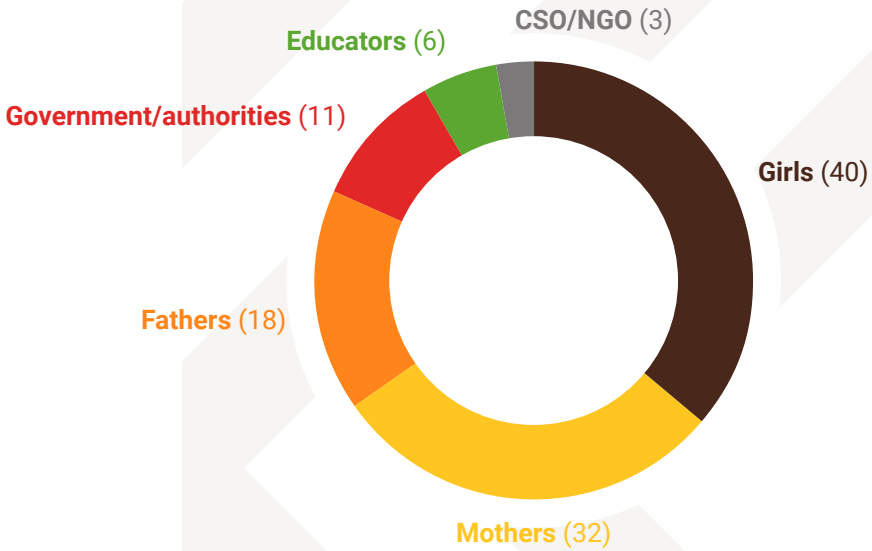
**Symposium on Centering Girls' Agency (Kampala, Uganda–23 May 2024)**

**54 TOTAL PARTICIPANTS**




**Community Dialogues (Lorugum and Lomil, Turkana County, Kenya–3 & 4 February 2025)**

**110 TOTAL PARTICIPANTS**



**Government representatives present:**

- Deputy County Commissioner
- Sub-county Administrator
- Ward Administrator
- Village Administrator
- Village Chiefs
- Assistant Village Chiefs
- Police Commander
- County Water Office Representatives

**Roundtable with civil society organizations (Nairobi, Kenya—6 February 2025)**

- Akili Dada
- Basic Needs Basic Rights
- CAMFED International
- Forum for African Women Educationalists Kenya Chapter
- GE-SCI
- GRIC
- Inua Kike
- Jaslika
- Jomo Kenyatta University
- Kenya National Defence University
- Magharibi Innovation Hub
- Population Council-Kenya
- RELI Africa
- Resource Center for women & girls
- Rise Up Together
- SHE RISE Initiative
- Siprosa Foundation
- UNICEF
- Zizi Afrique

# APPENDIX B. ACTION AREAS

**Figure 9. Existing civil society efforts to support girls' agency in the Karamoja region (Kenya)**

| OBJECTIVE | CSO'S CURRENTLY FOCUSING ON… |
|---|---|
| **Health & safety** | Menstrual health & hygiene |
| **Economic livelihoods** | Scholarships & cash transfers<br>Economic/entrepreneurial supports |
| **Knowledge, skills, & beliefs** | Life skills<br>Mentorship |
| **Champions & networks** | Parent engagement<br>Mindset change in adults |
| **Youth-centered spaces** | Safe spaces |

## AUTHOR BIOS

**JOYCE KINYANJUI** is the Managing Director of ziziAfrique, an organization focusing on education evaluation, and Advisor for the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund-Advancing Girls Education and Skills Programme. She was a 2016 Echidna Global Scholar at the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution and has been a co-founding member of the Learning and Action Alliance on Girls' Agency since 2022. Joyce also served on the global Learning Metrics Task Force and later contributed to the Learning Champion initiative, both with CUE at Brookings. She holds a B.A., PGDE and M.Ed. from Kenyatta University and a PhD in Arts from University of Zululand.

**MARY OTIENO** is a seasoned educationist with extensive experience in training teachers in educational planning and policy for equity, inclusion, and quality learning. Her research focuses on adolescent girls' education, particularly girls' agency and foundational learning. She collaborates with the National Gender and Equality Commission (NGEC), Kenya's Ministry of Education, the Brookings Institution's Echidna Global Scholars Alumni Network, the Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency (LAAGA) and the Knowing-Doing Network-Coordinating Group. Mary has significantly influenced girls' education policy and was recognized for Distinguished Service in Educational Reform in Sub-Saharan Africa by the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES).

**CHRISTINE APIOT OKUDI** is a dedicated advocate for education and social justice with extensive leadership experience in program management, capacity building, and academic excellence. She holds an MA in Development Studies and is pursuing a PhD in Social Justice Education at the University of Toronto. A 2016 Echidna Global Scholar and co-founding member of the Learning Action Alliance for Girls' Agency, she serves as Vice Chair on the board of the Forum for African Women Educationalists. Christine has driven initiatives to improve education access, quality, and equity across Uganda, strengthening teacher development, education management, gender-based violence prevention, and refugee child protection.

**JENNIFER 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.

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We are especially grateful to the girls and their communities in Loima and Lorugum, Turkana County, Kenya, and Abim, Uganda, where this research was conducted. It was an honor to work with the adolescent girls who participated in workshops, discussions, reflection sessions, and community dialogues to share their views on girls' agency. We extend heartfelt thanks to Chief Alice Apua Elimlim of Loima Ward, Loima Subcounty, whose outstanding leadership enabled broad participation in Kenya. Her active engagement, knowledge sharing, and trusted relationships with the girls and their families significantly enriched this work. In Uganda, we thank FAWE Uganda, the Chief Administrative Officer, District Education Officer, and local government administration of Abim, along with the headteachers of Awach, Abim, Kanu, and L'otuke seed secondary schools, for their collaboration. We also appreciate the thought partnership of colleagues at the Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency (LAAGA). Special thanks to peer reviewers Jin Chi, Armene Modi, Emily Markovich Morris, and Anthony Luvanda, and to Rebecca Winthrop for editorial guidance. Finally, we are deeply indebted to our colleagues at the CUE for their support throughout the research, writing, and design process—especially Atenea Rosado-Viurques, Claudia Hui, Nica Basuel, Malumbo Nyirenda, Anya Kasubhai, Shuyan Wu, and Erin Thomas.

## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This research was developed as part of the collaborative work of the Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency (LAAGA). Using participatory, girl-centered methodologies developed collectively, from 2023 to 2025, LAAGA has conducted research in highly marginalized communities in Bangladesh, Jamaica, Nigeria, Pakistan, Vietnam, Zimbabwe, and the Karamoja region along the Kenya/Uganda border, exploring how adolescent girls understand and exercise agency in their lives and the policies, practices, relationships, and mindsets that either support or constrain that. This paper presents findings from the Karamoja region.

## 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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## 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/.

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