

Perspectives on agency from adolescent girls in Zvishavane, Zimbabwe

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For adolescent girls living in highly marginalized contexts, agency is part of an everyday struggle. Girls make decisions about their lives while navigating 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 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 in a mining context in Zvishavane District in Zimbabwe. We outline the context of Zvishavane, describe our girl-centered methodological approach, share what we have learned with girls in the region, and propose priorities and strategies to mobilize actors to transform systems with and for girls' agency.

Agency was generally defined by the girls in this study as *kurongeka*, in Shona, which they associated with a sense of being and doing to benefit themselves and their families and communities. Girls' understanding of agency in Zvishavane was deeply rooted in the Ubuntu philosophy and specifically the idea of *hunhu*, or character, and girls emphasized the "right" kind of agency throughout their conversations. The expression of *kurongeka* was found to be related to individual attributes, knowledges, and attitudes, as well as relational and systemic factors:

- Industriousness, responsibility, self-respect, self-motivation, optimism, and resilience were valued components of girls' agency for girls in this study, especially as they ensured one was able to take care of others; in contrast, they were critical of expressions of agency that resulted in neglect of responsibilities (especially parental) or behaviors they saw as amoral.
- Relationships with female friends, family members, and other women in the community were key to girls' agency, providing emotional and economic support, role models, information and guidance.
- Systemic factors challenged girls' agency. The impact of extractive mining and poverty on the physical, environmental, and mental health of the community was identified as a key obstacle to girls' agency, as were restrictive gender norms and a lack of access to sexual and reproductive and educational rights.

Efforts to promote girls' agency in Zvishavane and similar contexts in Zimbabwe (and globally), must take an (eco)systemic approach, working with girls, their communities, and the key adults around



them to strengthen their shared ability to co-construct aspirations, make expansive decisions, and take strategic action in their lives and the lives of their communities. Some recommendations include:

- **National and local policy makers must work with girls and their communities to promote economic livelihoods, health and safety, relevant and inclusive education, and equitable gender norms within the context of climate crisis.** Address the systemic issues that restrict the agency of girls, their families, and their communities, centering adolescent girls' goals, needs, and voices at the forefront of policy development, execution, and evaluation.
- **Role models and agency allies in families, schools, religious institutions and in the community need opportunities to strengthen their skills, knowledge and beliefs and have access to relevant tools to support girls' agency.** The women, boys, and men around girls will be better equipped to identify, support, and actively engage girls' agency if they have the necessary tools, improved skills, and changed perspectives.
- **Adolescent girls strengthen their skills, knowledge and beliefs for agency.** Girls require experiences that help them identify, cultivate, and exercise their agency—both through social interaction and by strengthening their individual abilities.

Achieving this will require collaboration and coordinated efforts across diverse local and global education systems.



1. WHY EXPLORE AGENCY WITH ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN MARGINALIZED CONTEXTS¹

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 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 Siddiq, 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, Mkwanzizi, & 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, race, and gender, among other factors (Haslanger, 2024). Efforts (and social narratives) that advance

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



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 in the Zvishavane District.

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?

2. CONTEXT: ZVISHAVANE DISTRICT

This study engaged adolescent girls in the Zvishavane District, a semi-arid area in Midlands Province, Zimbabwe and one of the most marginalized in the country (Chinembiri, 2021; see Figure 1). Girls in Zvishavane face complex and multi-level risks linked to extractive mining activities and their associated environmental, health, social, and economic impacts in the region.

Sitting on top of the Great Dyke, which contains one of the world's largest reserves of minerals such as asbestos, platinum, gold, beryl, chromite, iron ore, and diamond (Lanham, 2001), Zvishavane is a hub of both legal and illegal mining activities. Major mining companies operating legally in the area include Mimosa Mining Company, Shabani Mine, Sabi Gold Mine and Murowa Diamonds, while artisanal small-scale mining (ASM) is also a dominant livelihood strategy in the district (Machinga, 2018). While mining contributes to poverty reduction and food security in the district, its operations have resulted in environmental and cultural degradation. Specifically, ASM activities have affected the environment in Zvishavane through abandoned deep and open pits that are hazardous to people and livestock. Deforestation is also widespread in the district, with vast portions of land cleared in preparation for small-scale mining activities (Munyoka, 2020).

Figure 1. Map of Zvishavane District



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



Culturally, the influx of nomadic miners has altered the way of life of indigenous communities in Zvishavane, a district of around 150,000 people (ZimStat, 2022). Locally referred to as MaShurugwi (machete-wielding men from Shurugwi), some of these nomadic miners can be aggressive in response to poverty, which has wreaked havoc in mining and other communities (Mafongoya et al., 2021). Women and girls living in mining communities are impacted by gender norms that perceive MaShurugwi violence as a common display of masculinity coupled with intense competition for mining spaces and thus, economic income.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is highly correlated with artisanal mining in Zimbabwe, and rates of GBV against women and girls in Zvishavane are high (Mafongoya et al. 2021). Alcohol and drug use, a problem among men participating in open cast mining (referred to as Makorokoza), is linked to sexual abuse of women and girls in the region and exacerbates the problem. Adding to already dire social straits for adolescent girls, rates of early and forced marriages in Zvishavane are very high, as families may perceive marriage to miners as a safety net for coping with environmental disaster and poverty (Mafongoya et al. 2021).

In terms of education, adolescent girls in Zvishavane face challenges that are common across Zimbabwe and the region, particularly in relation to learning and continuation of education. Years spent in school do not necessarily translate into skill development, and while primary school completion is relatively high in the country (86% for boys and 87% for girls in 2022), advancement to secondary and tertiary education remains low, particularly for girls (World Bank, 2025). Many students in Zimbabwe—especially girls—face financial, social, and cultural barriers that limit their ability to continue their education beyond the primary level. Only 14% of girls complete upper secondary education compared to 17% of boys, highlighting gender-specific challenges such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and limited access to safe learning environments (UNICEF, 2021). These challenges are more prevalent in underserved and marginalized regions, like Zvishavane, where structural inequalities and limited access to resources hinder educational progress.

In sum, adolescent girls in Zvishavane live at the intersection of compounding factors that perpetuate marginalization, including poverty, gender-based violence, violation of their sexual and reproductive health rights, climate change and disasters, and poor educational opportunities. In view of this context, agency becomes an invaluable force for adolescent girls to survive, thrive and reach their potential. Yet there remains a noteworthy absence of localized, girl-centered studies on girls' agency in contexts such as Zvishavane.



3. METHODOLOGY: EXPLORING AGENCY WITH GIRLS

This research sought to identify—with girls—the individual, relational, and institutional structures and dynamics that shape girls’ agency in the mining context of Zvishavane, Zimbabwe. Our primary research question was: What does agency look like for adolescent girls? Secondary questions were developed to further explore this (see Box 3).

To provide a comprehensive understanding of agency and its various dimensions within the mining context of Zvishavane, we used a participatory, qualitative, and girl-centered approach that aimed to ensure that the research process and outcomes were grounded in and driven by girls’ experiences, perspectives, and priorities. Within this holistic approach, we designed and implemented diverse

Box 3. Questions guiding LAAGA’s research in Zimbabwe

Principal research question

What does agency look like for girls between 10-19 years old in Zvishavane?

Secondary research questions

How do girls 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? What are the characteristics of those environments?

How do girls see others in their community exercising agency? How does this impact girls’ own sense of agency?

Who and what do girls identify as challenges to their agency? Who and what do they identify as supports to push against these challenges?



methods in order to unravel the intricacies of agency's manifestations and limitations within this specific sociocultural context.

The research took place during the summer of 2023 in Zvishavane; it included 29 girls aged 10 to 19, both in and out of school, and six adult key informants. Participants were purposefully selected in consultation with local leaders based on the following criteria: (1) being a girl impacted by mining; (2) between 10 and 19 years of age; and (3) being fluent in Shona and English, both written and spoken. These criteria were essential to ensuring that participants not only represented the population at the heart of the research but could also fully comprehend and engage in the research process, which was conducted in Shona and English.





Girl-centered approach

Three activities were designed to help girls identify and share their understandings and definitions of agency as well as the personal, relational, situational, and structural factors that enabled or constrained their exercise of that agency (see Figure 2). Individual interviews were conducted with 16 girls (3 in primary school, 9 in secondary school, 1 in university, and 3 out of school) in their homes. Additionally, two focus group discussions were held during a church gathering with two groups divided by age—10-14 years and 15-19 years—and included 4 primary school girls, 7 in secondary school, and 2 who were out of school at the time of the research. The community mapping exercises engaged these same 13 girls from the focus groups. Research was mostly carried out during the weekend in order not to interrupt daily educational activities. Audio recordings and note taking were used to capture girls' insights without distracting them from the conversations.

Given the research involved work with adolescents, researchers successfully completed ethical training to work with minors prior to data collection. Consent forms were clearly explained and distributed for research participants and their guardians to sign before data collection activities began.

Figure 2. Methods used in Zvishavane

ACTIVITY	PARTICIPANTS	DESCRIPTION	OBJECTIVE
Individual Interviews	16	Girls were interviewed individually in order to create a sense of intimacy, care, and confidence. All interviews were carried out in their homes. Girls were asked to think about their agency, the obstacles and supports they found to its exercise, and the short- and long-term consequences of their decisions. The questions varied from everyday choices to more systemic issues.	Girls identify how they understand and define agency
Story sharing and focus group discussions	13	<p>Girls gathered in a circle to share their stories at a church. Researchers led the conversation by sharing some of their personal stories and how they got to become adults. This initial introduction served to create a sense of community with the girls.</p> <p>Girls were invited to share some of their stories guided by the following questions: Who or what influences her decisions? Who has been supportive? Who has rejected them? How does her family and community react when she makes a decision? What factors influence her?</p> <p>Following these stories, researchers introduced the term "agency" by stating that it encompasses all of the girls' reflections regarding decisionmaking, weighing consequences, and navigating influences. The researchers then asked the girls to co-construct their understanding of agency (including defining it in their own language, Shona) based on their lived experiences and the themes that had emerged collectively.</p>	Girls share experiences of exercising agency and identify individual factors and characters that supported or limited that.



Community Mapping	13	<p>Girls were invited to draw the spaces where they felt safe or unsafe and the supports and challenges to agency in their communities. When doing this, they were asked to think about where these supports and challenges are spatially located and how they relate to each other.</p> <p>They were then asked to reflect and share about how these spatial locations might be dynamic and vary by time of the day or specific situation. Furthermore, they were asked to talk about how they face these challenges and what strategies have worked for them.</p>	<p>Girls identify community challenges and supports to exercising agency in their context and how they relate to her individual agency.</p>
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Key informant interviews

Additionally, key informant interviews were held with six community actors: a political leader, youth chairperson, health officer, teacher, religious leader, and a retired police chief inspector. These community actors play crucial roles in understanding girls' agency by providing insights into social norms, enforcement mechanisms, and support systems that influence girls' autonomy and rights. Together, these key informants provided a multi-dimensional understanding of the social, legal, health, and cultural factors influencing girls' agency in Zvishavane, identifying barriers and facilitators within the community and enabling a more comprehensive understanding of programs that support girls' rights within this specific context.

Community dialogues

In order to strengthen the participatory nature of our study, further integrate participant voices, promote accountability to the community, and increase the relevance of LAAGA's work, we discussed the research findings with the girls and the adults they mentioned as having an impact on their sense of agency in March of 2025 (Dick, 2015; Kwan & Walsh, 2018; Patnaik, 2019). This occurred in Zvishavane during a one-day workshop involving around 50 community members, including families, teachers, district and provincial authorities, and the girls.

The girls who had taken part in the study had the chance to talk about the results, prioritize the problems, and consider possible solutions with their communities. This workshop aimed to increase the cohesion, commitment, and capacity of community and government actors working with girls in Zvishavane in order to better support adolescent girls' agency through collaborative action. As part of the workshop, we did a final community walkabout with community members who had the opportunity to show the points that girls had identified as challenging or difficult for them. This walkabout made visible the profound lack of social infrastructure (lighting, parks, roads, etc.) and its implications on girls' agency. The workshop and the walkabout reflected and reinforced the iterative and cyclical nature of LAAGA's research to action process.



4. FINDINGS

Agency was generally defined by the girls in this research as Kurongeka in Shona, which they explained meant 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. A girl with agency was called musikana akarongeka.

Arriving at this understanding of agency was not easy, and during their discussions, girls came to define a girl who embodies the full expression of agency by describing one who they felt does not. In Shona, a girl who doesn't effectively exercise her agency was said to be a "musikana akadhakwa," literally translated as "drunken girl." The girls elaborated on this with words such as disorganized, unstable, indecisive, weak-minded, or lacking vision, focus or purpose in life. Girls associated this with someone who is uncultured in the way she speaks and dresses, lacks respect, gives into peer pressure, and does not take good care of her body. A musikana akadhakwa, they said, makes impulsive decisions and lacks good judgement.

In this section we delve deeper into girls' understandings of agency; the key spaces, people, and relationships that supported girls as they navigated the conditions around them; and opportunities and threats to exercising agency in Zvishavane, including the effects of socioeconomic challenges like poverty and violence, limited access to sexual and reproductive health rights, discriminatory gender norms, inadequate educational access and support, and climate change.

Girls' understanding of agency: In benefit of present and future life

The girls who participated in this research in Zvishavane related agency to a way of "thinking and doing that benefits a girl's present and future life" as well as her relationships (see Figure 3). Their discussions communicated a moral component of agency, embedded within an understanding of its "right" use, especially in relation to the impact of girls' choices on immediate families, and their sociocultural and economic contexts. As the girls phrased this, it was about protecting family honor by behaving in culturally appropriate ways, being "a blessing, not a burden," articulating an implicit understanding of the ways agency is nested within their larger social system.

As seen in Figure 3, girls expressed agency as being disciplined and working hard to stay "passionate about life" and becoming the best you can be in defiance of challenging circumstances. Doing this, they said, required restraint and discipline, sacrificing for the sake of the future, as well as exercising wisdom and discretion, managing expectations and "uncomplicating" their lives. As one 15-year-old girl said, "a girl with agency doesn't bite what she is not able to chew."



Figure 3. Girls' understandings of agency to benefit their presents and futures

AGENCY AS RIGHT THOUGHT	AGENCY AS RIGHT ACTION
Strength and fortitude	Become the best you can be
Purposefulness, achievement and goal orientation	Build beneficial relationships; choose good friends
Initiative, self-motivation	Work toward self-sufficiency and contribute to the well-being of others
Responsibility	Seek support when needed
Industriousness	Make healthy, safe choices
Self-knowledge (priorities, strengths and weaknesses)	Speak one's mind, insist on one's rights
Social knowledge (how to treat others, who to go to for help and advice)	Assess and avoid danger; value body and protect self
Self-respect, love, and self-control	Identify and seek opportunities for personal development
Resilience, strength of character	Make the most out of limited resources
Optimism, positive outlook	Feed your mind with constructive thoughts
Planfulness; organization, time and expectation management	Stay well-informed and use technology responsibly

Hunhu (character) as a critical defense in a challenging social setting

The girls acknowledged that exercising this type of agency in a social setting like Zvishavane is not easy. According to them, for adolescent girls to overcome the different contextual and systemic challenges they face in this mining town they had to possess certain qualities and attributes as well as adopt some behaviors. The girls defined these as “high moral standards,” or hunhu in Shona (see Box 4). Girls’ understandings and emphasis on hunhu reflect the larger Ubuntu philosophy present in their context, which advocates for social order and cohesion by acknowledging that an individual is not an island and that one’s actions affect the other and society at large (Ogude, 2018).

As girls described it, hunhu is a character trait that protects a girl from bringing disgrace upon herself and her family. Hunhu is demonstrated through the “right” actions girls associated with agency in Box 4. It is also shown in the ways that adolescent girls support their friends, families and vulnerable members of the community. As one 15-year-old girl shared, “Girls should lend a hand to the less privileged members of society.” The contextual significance of hunhu was seconded by the community Health Officer who stated that, “A girl who respects herself gains the admiration of the community and is able to ward off wayward boys or men.” In this statement, we see that for girls in Zvishavane, using their agency in ways consistent with hunhu could create opportunities both to be seen as a leader in the community and to be safe from gender-based violence, both of which can expand space for further agency.



Box 4. Girls' definitions of hunhu (character)

A girl with hunhu is a girl who is cultured and decent. In addition to respecting herself, she should respect elders and guests. This respect is expressed in the way she carries herself, speaks, dresses, and greets adults. When speaking with adults, she should use age-appropriate language and avoid vulgar words and must not be quarrelsome or too loud. She must obey her parents and listen to sound counsel from other caring and responsible adults in the community. A girl who embodies hunhu must have proper hygiene, always look smart and presentable. Her clothes should be modest and must not expose too much of her legs and bust.

Notably, as described by girls, hunhu also meant that girls were expected to speak up to advocate for and protect their own rights, especially in terms of bodily autonomy, education, and economic participation.

Girls were critical of expressions of the “wrong” type of agency

As described above, the girls in this research came to their understanding of “right” agency in the context of Zvishavane by describing examples to the contrary. The girls spoke of this as not exercising agency, which can be understood as exercising agency in the “wrong” way. That is, agency which does not benefit an individual or the people, relationships or community around them. Many of these examples had to do with neglect, especially neglect of one’s duties to children or responsibilities as parents.

Parents who neglect their children and expose them to abuse whilst spending time in mining activities.

...who are not responsible for the education of their daughter

...who are physically and emotionally absent in the lives of their daughters.

Girls were especially critical when this took on gendered dimensions.

...who treat children differently because of gender. For example, they give work to a girl before going to school but allow males to do nothing.

...who are able-bodied but choose to be idle. They end up marrying off their young daughters or sell them off to prostitution for money.

...who ignore the voices and needs of their daughters in favor of sons.

Girls also questioned decisions and actions that people made in relation to sex and drug and alcohol use. These activities, which are influenced by larger systemic forces like poverty, the extractive economy, and gender-based discrimination (discussed below), illustrate again how the girls in this research experienced and navigated the tension between exercising agency to be and become who they wanted to be (hunhu) and some of the challenges they saw around them.

Girls who sleep around with men in exchange for nice things and those who drink alcohol and take drugs like marijuana and end up having loose morals.

Young people who waste their lives on drugs, crime, violence, and prostitution instead of focusing on productive activities.

Illegal gold miners who spend all their earnings on drinks and pleasure and fail to save for the future.

Finally, girls were also critical of people in the community who they felt were financially irresponsible or did not “live within their means,” providing the example of a mining family in the neighborhood which used to live extravagantly but failed to invest. “Now they are so poor and cannot afford to send their children to school.”





Girls look to women in their communities as key agency role models and supports

Girls gave examples of people who they see exercising agency in their communities. Through these examples, a picture emerges that is consistent with how the girls in this research linked “right action” to the exercise of agency in Zvishavane. Their agency role models demonstrated common themes: hard work, especially in the face of challenges, which promoted economic independence (see Figure 4). Notably, in most of the examples offered by the girls, this economic independence was coupled with a commitment to take care of others, again reflecting the broader Ubuntu philosophy.

Figure 4. Girls’ agency role models in Zvishavane

EXAMPLES GIVEN BY GIRLS	AGENCY THEMES
My aunt is a vegetable vendor and very industrious. Through her business, she pays for my fees and that of her daughter, currently studying medicine in Russia. She inspires me to be industrious and earn my own money.	Hard work Economic independence Taking care of others
[My sister] is a widow, living with HIV, but [she] overcame many obstacles and is an example of hard work and resilience.	Hard work Overcoming obstacles
[A girl from my neighborhood] is well-organized. She completed her studies and pursued a career in the hospitality industry. She raised the living standards of her parents and siblings before getting married.	Hard work Economic independence Taking care of others
A female engineer... I admire her profession, financial independence, hard work, and her ability to take care of her children.	Hard work Economic independence Taking care of others
[An affluent family in my community] ...Theirs is a story of ‘from rags to riches.’ They did not accept poverty as their fate but worked tirelessly to have a better life. I aspire to do the same to help my parents.	Hard work Economic independence Taking care of others Overcoming obstacles
[A local businesswoman] ... she started a school and operates a shelter which offers help to the less privileged.	Taking care of others
Estelaa [a model in Indian action movies]... I admired the role she plays of a strong and independent woman who owns houses and cars despite being a divorcee.	Economic independence Overcoming obstacles
I listen to this Jamaican musician [Shenssea], and I love her songs. She sings about women’s empowerment and independence. I like the way she dresses, speaks, and her singing talent.	Independence



Many of the people identified as role models were also key supports for adolescent girls in the expression of their own agency. The girls in this research pointed especially to mothers, sisters, aunts, and friends, as well as other community members (see Figure 5). These women played critical roles in the lives of the girls we worked with, sharing information, social knowledge and guidance, and offering economic, emotional, and social support for girls as they navigated challenging conditions in Zvishavane.

The Ubuntu principles were also evident in girls' discussions of the important role of women in the community outside of their direct families. The girls described being surrounded by women who play motherly (or aunt) roles. As described by the girls, these were strong, self-dependent, industrious, and productive women who would provide support for girls and their families during events such as birthdays, graduations, kitchen parties, weddings, baby showers, and funerals. The girls also described how women in the community had formed rotating savings and credit clubs to save money and lend to each other during difficult times. When it was a sizeable amount, they would buy and share things like groceries and other household wares, thereby improving the quality of life for girls and their families and helping to counteract some of the constraints on agency associated with poverty.

Figure 5: Agency supports offered by women

ACTOR	ROLE IN GIRLS' LIVES	SPECIFIC AGENCY SUPPORTS IDENTIFIED BY GIRLS
Mothers	Development, protection and socialization	<p>Exemplify and teach their daughters Ubuntu principles and virtues such as love, kindness, honesty, hard work, chastity, patience and smartness.</p> <p>Ensure girls have access to education, healthy meals, good clothes, sanitary pads, and other toiletries.</p> <p>Build awareness of the dangers of early sex, unwanted pregnancies, and HIV/STIs and monitor girls' activities and movements to protect them from abuse and exploitation.</p>
Sisters	"A backbone," support at home, school, and the community	<p>Advocate when there is unfair treatment at home and protect girls from bullies and other troublemakers in the community.</p> <p>Assist with household chores, studies, and school projects and be role models to younger sisters.</p> <p>Provide emotional and material support to help girls achieve their goals.</p> <p>Serve as trusted confidants for girls to share things that they cannot discuss with parents or friends.</p>



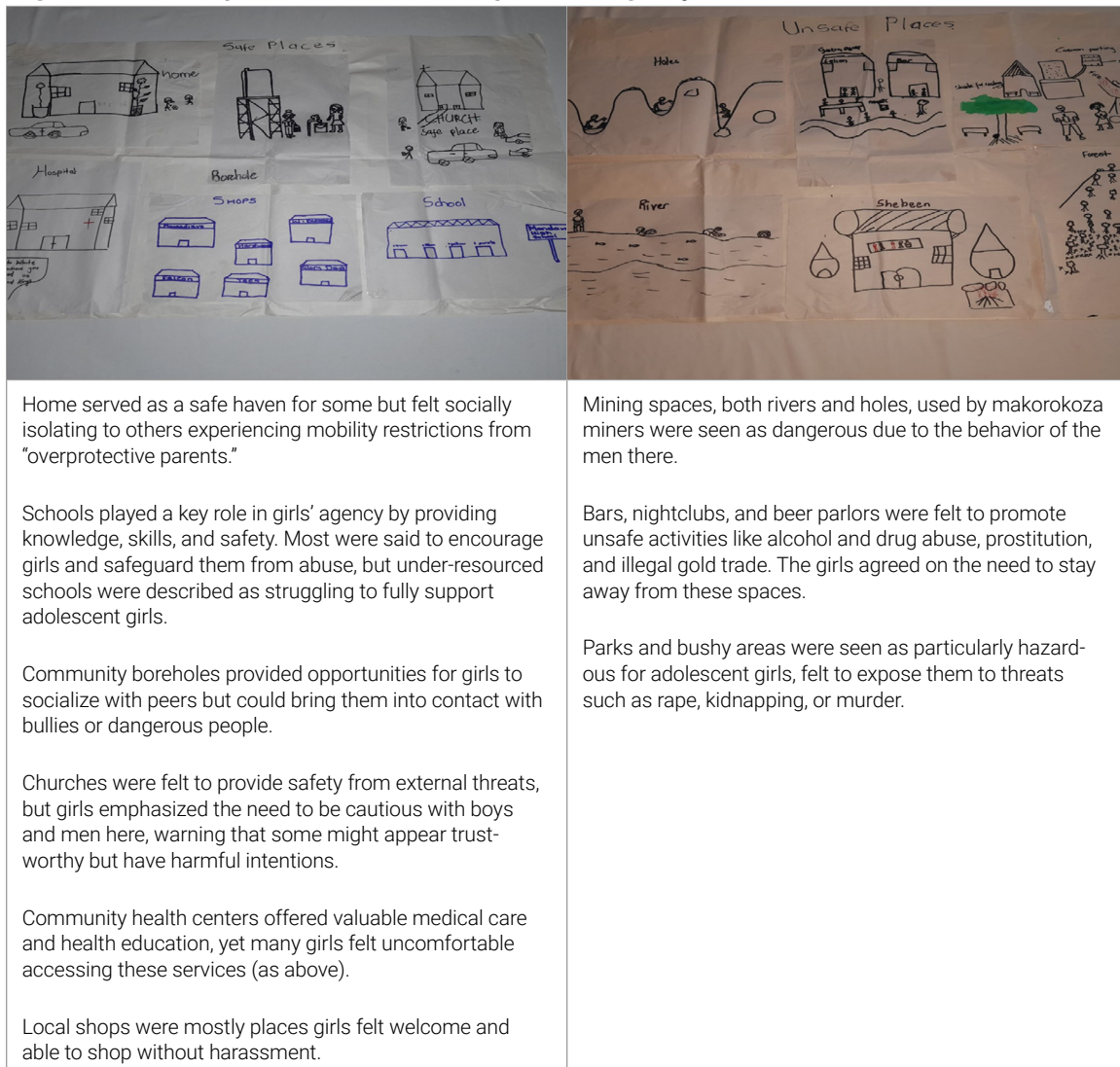
Aunts	Counsel and guidance	<p>Offer counseling and guidance at every stage of girls' development, especially related to things parents generally do not discuss with daughters.³</p> <p>Teach girls about social roles and expectations, menstruation management, men, sexuality, marriage, childbearing, and how to become good homemakers.</p> <p>Perform birth, marriage, and funeral rites in families</p>
Friends	A shoulder to lean on	<p>Offer an honest, kind, caring, and trusting relationship for girls.</p> <p>Provide emotional and material support.</p> <p>Be a model to girls in the way they think, talk, dress, and relate with boys and men.</p>
Other women in community	Mold girls, provide material and social support	<p>Provide social and economic safety nets, supporting girls and their families in good and tough times.</p> <p>Offer continual support to girls by assuming the role played by aunts in families (especially women in church).</p>

Within their local ecosystem, girls found spaces that promoted and constrained agency

The girls in this study emphasized the importance of spaces where they could be and feel safe from violence, connect with peers to reduce social isolation, and strengthen relationships with the community, all of which they linked to a greater sense of agency. For most girls, these included home, school, communal boreholes, churches, and local shops, which were said to create an environment where girls could thrive despite the challenges posed by the mining environment (see Figure 6). Spaces associated with mining activities, drinking and drugs, and parks or isolated bushy areas, on the other hand, were described as inappropriate and unsafe for adolescent girls.

³ Traditionally, parents in Zvishavane generally have not discussed sex and sexuality with their children. That role has been played by aunts and uncles, for daughters and sons respectively. Recent trends, including increased social mobility, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and use of ICT have shifted this, and parents are beginning to talk more about these issues.

Figure 6. Girls' maps of safe and unsafe spaces for agency



In addition to these spaces, adolescent girls in Zvishavane are surrounded by social actors and institutions that could provide resources, services, and supports to nurture and maximize girls' agency. These include parents, community members (women and elders), schools, churches, and health centers mentioned above. The girls in this study also mentioned the Victim Friendly Unit of the Zimbabwe Republic Police, the radio station, Department of Social Welfare, Councilors, the district Member of Parliament, workers and programs from multilaterals like UNICEF as well as national nongovernmental organizations and community-based organizations, individual donors, and local businesses and mining corporations. For these local social systems to be effective and sustainable promoters of girls' agency, relevant actors need to understand what is needed and be willing and well-capacitated to provide this.



» **Technology creates new spaces, opportunities, and challenges for girls' agency**

Access to information and communication technology (ICT) provides vast developmental opportunities and is a tool for girls to exercise their agency. The adolescent girls in this study described using ICT for educational purposes like researching various subjects, learning new skills, seeking developmental opportunities, accessing positive role models, and communicating as well as for entertainment purposes. The girls described how important it was to exercise agency in relation to ICT during the Covid-19 pandemic, during which flexibility in adopting new technologies in learning and using their time constructively to access helpful information on services and supports to manage their physical and mental health were crucial. However, the girls noted that many adolescent girls do not take advantage of ICT for their studies. According to the participants, some girls spent time on social media and used data bundles meant for school assignments to download movies while others visited adult sites.

Systemic factors constrain girls' agency

Adolescent girls living in the mining zone of Zvishavane faced complex challenges in their daily lives. Poverty was described as a major constraint on girls' agency, as well as the widespread illegal mining activities in the district, which further complicate the trajectories of adolescent girls. In addition to stresses associated with their transition from childhood to adulthood, girls in Zvishavane grapple with increased sexual assault, physical violence, and emotional abuse due to the influx of men in the district. As prior research has noted (Arnett, 1999), the growing urbanization, convergence of cultures, and the need for exploration makes adolescence a very delicate period, more so for girls in the mining context. The situation is worsened by persisting gender norms that tolerate the abuse of power by men.

» **Poverty, violence, and other socioeconomic factors challenge girls' agency**

According to key informants, communities in Zvishavane experience a wide range of socioeconomic challenges that pose a significant threat to girls' agency. These include intersecting and interrelated socioeconomic challenges like poverty, violence, theft, prostitution, drug and substance abuse, diseases, and death. Due to its location on the mineral-rich Great Dyke, Zvishavane's primarily extractive economy creates environmental and other health problems. Indeed, girls mentioned that sickness and death in the family—and the lack of a social safety net in these cases—has led some girls to leave school and others engage in risky behaviors, such as prostitution, to earn money to survive.

When my mother fell sick, I was taken in by relatives who promised to send me to school. Unfortunately, they did not fulfill their promise, so at the age of fifteen, I had to become a housemaid.

After the death of my father, I suffered emotional stress from my mother, who used



to drink. She later married again, and my stepfather verbally abused me, I dropped out of school and had to leave home to stay with my aunt after my stepfather started asking me to sleep with him.

Additionally, the mining town attracts illegal miners who were seen as disrupting cultural values and causing a sense of insecurity in the community. As expressed by the Youth Chairperson,

The life of some gold panners is highly immoral and unrestrained and most of them behave badly under the influence of drugs. They take drugs to perform highly manual tasks such as digging and [to gain] the courage to burrow their way through deep, dark, and dangerous pits. Their dependency on drugs compromises their character and they are not able to interact with the community civilly.

» **Girls face barriers to their sexual and reproductive health rights**

The focus of girls in Zvishavane on exercising their agency to protect their sexual and reproductive health as well as their psychosocial well-being must be understood within this context. The mining activities and the associated lifestyles increase the risk of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STI) in the district (Nyashanu et al., 2021). “At one point, Zvishavane was leading in HIV infection compared to other districts,” said the Health Officer. The girls described how they felt this situation was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. They noted an increase in cases of sexual abuse, HIV and STI infections, unplanned pregnancies, and forced marriages because of government-induced total and partial lockdowns.

Several girls noted the challenges being faced by people living with HIV, who they felt are still being stigmatized. According to the girls, this affects their self-esteem and leads some people living with HIV to discontinue their medications or commit suicide.

Yet despite being aware of the high rates of HIV and STIs, girls in the community are often unable to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights. Sanitary pads were said to be expensive—most girls could not afford them—and some schools lacked facilities for the disposal of used pads. In addition, most girls found it difficult to go to health centers to seek medical attention or acquire contraceptives or information on sexual and reproductive health; the Health Officer explained that girls feel ashamed because they are served together with adults from the community.

» **Discriminatory gender norms constrain girls’ agency**

Girls described the ways in which gender norms constrained their ability to exercise their agency. This ranged from being left out of family decisionmaking, including when it was about girls’ lives, to facing gender-based harassment and violence in the streets.



Generally, due to the paternalistic culture, some fathers consider the girl child inferior and thus girls are excluded from decisionmaking. However, this is slowly changing as communities see girls succeeding and supporting families and communities.

Some girls face discrimination and ill-treatment by parents who were expecting male children, due to the existing patriarchal values.

We are harassed by some mean men when walking along the streets, taunting us on our dressing and body shapes

» **The climate crisis places increased burdens on girls**

The climate crisis constrains the ability of girls to fully exercise their agency by adding more responsibilities to them. Zvishavane is a dry, drought-prone area, which causes water challenges in the district. Many households must fetch water from communal boreholes or from other water sources in the community, the responsibility for which most often falls to girls. Girls must wake up early to fetch water before going to school and upon return. This routine is tiresome to girls, who arrive at school exhausted and face the same when they get home. As a result, girls have little time for themselves for study or recreation.

However, the girls who participated in this research shared examples of ways they are exercising their agency for climate-resilience, helping them to adapt effectively to climate change at home, school, and the community. For example, by using communal boreholes, adolescent girls have leveraged improved water access to gain more control over their time, education, health, and social interactions in dry areas. The girls shared strategies they have developed in response to increased demands related to climate adaptation activities, such as time management (to ensure punctuality at school and sufficient time for homework), fetching water in groups and taking turns filling containers (to limit violence and competition at boreholes), and negotiating with their brothers to assist with wheelbarrows.

» **Girls need additional supports to ensure completion of educational trajectories**

As evidenced by the systemic issues listed here, girls face a variety of challenges to the completion of their education. This is exacerbated by a lack of supports at key moments along their educational pathways. The Youth Chairperson, for example, explained that girls in Zvishavane lack access to counselling services to address issues affecting their transitions to secondary education. They also find few opportunities for development outside of school, such as youth development programs.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Adolescent girls facing diverse structural and systemic challenges in Zvishavane find support for their agency by accessing skills, knowledge, and material resources through supportive relationships and safe spaces constructed primarily with other women in the community. The adolescent girls in this study defined and experienced agency in ways that are both individual and communal and emphasized the importance of bringing their agency to bear to achieve their desired goals while at the same time refraining from things that they see as detrimental to their progress and well-being. The study reveals the girls' social ecosystems and the value they place on their relationships and social expectations and responsibilities. In Zvishavane, girls communicated that their personal agency would be futile without the support of caring people in their lives, especially when facing systemic challenges.





This study also reveals the livelihood and security threats to adolescent girls in the mining context, the barriers they face to education and health rights, and the additional burden put on them by the intersection of climate change and gender norms. Given this background, adolescent girls in mining hotspots like Zvishavane need context-specific interventions that help them to expand and exercise their agency.

In this section we present three action areas with associated priority next steps that are grounded in our research with the girls and conversations with the broader ecosystem of actors in the community dialogues. These areas aim to align policies, practices, relationships, and mindsets to promote girls' agency in Zvishavane.

Action Area 1

» **National and local policy makers work with girls and their communities to promote economic livelihoods, health and safety, relevant and inclusive education, and equitable gender norms within the context of climate crisis.**

The systemic issues that restrict the agency of girls, their families, and their communities must be addressed immediately. Adolescent girls' goals, needs, and voices must be at the center of policy development, execution, and evaluation in order for a transformative policy approach to be successful.

Priority activities:

- Encourage long-term, locally led economic growth in the area, particularly for women and girls. Given the specific economic context and the impact of climate change on this community, promoting equitable and resilient local growth may involve entrepreneurial training and capacity-building in green economy skills.
- Engage girls and local health workers in the development and implementation of a specific policy to ensure adolescent girls can fully exercise their sexual and reproductive health rights.
- Facilitate girls' access to safe, public spaces. Support long-term investments in social infrastructure such as public health, parks, and street lighting.
- Collaborate with girls and their communities to create a plan that guarantees all youth have access to pertinent, high-quality education.
- Co-create strategies with girls and their communities to transform discriminatory gender norms, particularly in relation to climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies.



Action Area 2

- » **Women role models and agency allies in families, schools, religious institutions and in the community strengthen their skills, knowledge and beliefs and have access to relevant tools to support girls' agency.**

Girls identified women in their families, schools, and communities as key to their development and exercise of agency. These women can better identify, support, and actively engage girls' agency if they have the necessary tools, improved skills, and changed perspectives.

Priority activities:

- Engage girls and the women around them to create locally relevant developmental opportunities, guides, and toolkits that support girls' agency.
- Provide intergenerational, gender-responsive, and inclusive opportunities for girls and their agency allies to strengthen skills, knowledge, and beliefs around girls' agency. Make sure that facilitators and instructors of these opportunities have received sufficient training.
- Implement holistic and context-specific strategies to change social norms, practices, and behaviors that minimize girls' agency.
- Encourage boys and men to support and advocate for girls as agency allies. Community storytelling initiatives that highlight male role models who support girls' education, safety, and leadership; father-daughter engagement activities that promote understanding and support; and discussions or workshops on positive masculinity and shared caregiving could help achieve this.

Action Area 3

- » **Adolescent girls strengthen their skills, knowledge and beliefs for agency.**

Girls require experiences that help them identify, cultivate, and exercise their agency—both through social interaction and by strengthening their individual abilities.

- Create safe spaces for girls to connect, fight social isolation, learn, share challenges, and collaborate to collectively address shared challenges.
- Offer leadership opportunities for girls both within and outside of schools, such as through community projects and youth-led groups, to help them develop their goals and agency skills while encouraging them to actively participate in and have an impact on their communities.
- Prioritize the agency and voice of young people in community discussions and decisionmaking.



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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. Together, we are exploring how adolescent girls understand and exercise agency in their lives and the social, cultural, environmental, and economic policies, practices, and relationships that support or constrain that. This paper presents findings from and recommendations for Zimbabwe.

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.

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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