



Embedding Equality in Education
A podcast from the Brookings Institution

**“Why girls in marginalized contexts? A commitment to justice
and agency in research”**

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Episode Summary:

In this second episode of Embedding Equality in Education, hosts Jenn O'Donoghue and Edem Ossai explore why the Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency (LAAGA) chose to do research with girls in marginalized contexts. Drawing on voices from LAAGA researchers and girls themselves, they unpack how marginalization is shaped by shifting social, economic, and environmental systems, from poverty and early marriage to gender-based violence and climate change and why understanding these dynamics requires centering the perspectives of those most affected. The conversation also challenges common language in the field, like "vulnerable" or "empowerment," and makes the case for participatory research that engages girls as co-constructors of knowledge rather than subjects of study.

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O'DONOGHUE: Hello everyone, and welcome back to *Embedding Equality in Education*, or the 3Es podcast. My name is Jennifer O'Donoghue, and I am a senior fellow and deputy director of the Center for Universal Education at Brookings. This is our second episode of the 3Es podcast, and really this is being created as a space to share the work that we are doing on gender equality in and through education here at Brookings and with a network of colleagues around the world.

So we will be sharing research, stories of progress, stories of impact, really digging into how can we advance gender equality in and through education, how can we change outcomes and opportunities for young people around the world. And joining me on this first season as co-host is my dear colleague, Edem, and I will pass to her to tell you more about this season and and this episode.

OSSAI: Thank you, Jenn. Hi again, everyone. Really excited to be back with you in this second episode of our 3Es podcast. My name is Edem Ossai, and I am an education leader based in Nigeria. It's exciting to be, you know, continuing our conversation. If you will recall from our first episode, we talked a lot about the purpose of this podcast. We shared a little bit about agency. In fact, not a little bit, we actually delved a lot into agency. We talked about why it matters. We took a look at the work that LAAGA has been doing, and LAAGA really stands for the Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency.

And I'm super excited to be back again with Jenn on a second episode. And this time around, we're going to be focusing on another important topic to LAAGA. We'll be diving deeper into why we made the decision to work with girls, especially girls in marginalized contexts. So maybe let's, you know, strike home from there. Jenn, why did we decide to work with girls in marginalized contexts?

[1:55]

O'DONOGHUE: Thank you, Edem. You know, I think in the last episode we talked about really unpacking this term agency and and how LAAGA, you know, when we got together in in May of 2022, we we first wanted to really think about and take a critical look at, like, what is this word agency and what does this mean? And, you know, in those same conversations we started to to unpack this word "girls." Right? We were focused on girls' agency.

And so, you know, we said, "Which girls are we talking about?" Like, understanding girlhood is not a universal experience, and it really varies in many different ways. So what do we mean by girls, and who are we talking about?

And, you know, I think within that we really brought this shared commitment, it's an ethical commitment, I would say, to to justice and really thinking about education for justice and and gender equality as part of that project. And so if we are going to be doing justice oriented work, we wanted to ensure that we were really working with people who were excluded. Right? Who were left out of of experiences and opportunities, and resources and and things like that.

And so I think for us from the beginning, you know, it was that conversation of who are the most excluded young people? And then, you know, moving into, into that space and and we unpacked that in the beginning.

But, you know, I think this piece around around marginalization and exclusion also was an opportunity for us to really look at and take a critical look at some of the words that are commonly used in work around girls' education and girls' agency in particular, and words like "empowerment," words like "vulnerable young people," and things like that.

So let's hear from our colleague Arundhati Gupta about what it means for her to focus on marginalization in our work in LAAGA.

[3:40]

GUPTA: The focus on marginalization was to not look at it as like a vulnerability or a disadvantage that girls themselves somehow were unique through their own actions in this position, but really the sort of societal and systemic exclusion that that put them in this position of marginalization and how that is impacting their day-to-day lives.

[4:02]

OSSAI: You know, looking at marginalized girls really took us on a journey. And when we think about how even understanding how prior work around youth empowerment really privileged the experiences of boys and made us very intentional about focusing the spotlight on girls' experiences really in education.

And then going into that space and discovering that girls cannot be looked at as a monolith. You know, girls are diverse. And the different contexts, you know, reveal different forms of exclusion. And so just understanding the intentionality behind the word "inclusion" took us on, you know, a a journey to the fringes, really.

Everybody who is not considered main in any context, you know, but is sidelined or kept in the margins. We began to see different pictures and, you know, we saw how marginalization also shifts over time. It shifts, you know, also depending on social phenomena occurring. Conflict, for instance, presents different pictures of marginalization, climate experiences, poverty obviously.

You know, even now in the context of digital access, when we think about technologies today and what that means and what the picture therefore begins to evolve into and look like for girls, also began to present different pictures and and and scenarios for us. And just being intentional helped us to begin to see more of these images of who the marginalized girl is.

But I think our focus on her or why we decided to work with these kinds of girls was because we wanted to understand from a very practical, lived sort of lens, you know, what their realities are like. And no one's better able to share, you know, their lived experiences than the individual herself.

And and that's why, you know, girls had to be centered. It brought us back to the whole conversation about even agency and why we centered girls and why therefore

we had to center the marginalized girl, because she was in a better position to help us understand her reality. And so that's why LAAGA has really, you know, been very intentional about this focus, so to speak.

[6:00]

O'DONOGHUE: Yeah. Thank you. And you mentioned, you know, that no one is better placed for us to understand and to help us understand how that marginalization is lived and what that looks like than the girls themselves.

So, our colleague, Nasrin Siddiq, in Bangladesh, you know, has really been working at this intersection of education and poverty and gender and climate change. So, let's hear a bit more from her about what marginalization looks like in that context.

[6:28]

SIDDIQA: So we have started to work with Feni District. Actually it is a climate prone area. It is near the coastal region. So people are suffering with the flood and disaster. We found that the strict social norms are there. We found that there are a lot of challenges, especially in most of the cases in a global south country's challenges falls on girls basically. So we have to say that boys also suffer, but girls are most. So that we found early marriage challenges, early motherhood, and also strict social norms.

[7:01]

O'DONOGHUE: Let's hear from a girl in Nigeria who talks about early motherhood and its impacts.

GIRL 1 IN NIGERIA: {translated} *Personally, I did not wish to stay in Iseyin because this is where I was born and raised. This is where I also schooled. I did not wish to be married here, but since my parents do not like their female children to live far away from them, that is why I'm still at Iseyin. I got married here and I'm working here as well.*

[7:30]

O'DONOGHUE: You know, I think that what we heard from the girls, again, is a reminder to us of the sort of multidimensional nature of marginalizing systems and structures and factors, how those are dynamic and those change over time, and how those are really lived by people.

[7:44]

And, you know, as we moved into this work, and thinking about ourselves as a research collective, right, it became really important for us to think about the ways in which research itself can marginalize young people, and a sort of history and many traditions, right, within research. This is, of course, not all research.

But, you know, some research that doesn't center the, like, lived experiences of young people, that is not participatory, that doesn't bring young people into that process of naming these systems and structures, of identifying what are the barriers

of thinking about the solutions, and that, you know, that research process itself can really be an experience of marginalization for for many young people.

And we also have a a quote here, a clip from another girl in Nigeria about some of the factors in her context that constrain agency.

[8:36]

GIRL 2 IN NIGERIA: {translated} *Previously I wanted to learn a skill at the main market and was denied. They didn't agree and said that I should learn it at the sawmill. While learning at the sawmill, I got pregnant. I wasn't happy about it because I could no longer complete my schooling.*

[8:55]

OSSAI: So here's what marginalization looked like for adolescent girls in some of the marginalized contexts that we looked at in our work in LAAGA. Girls experience a deep burden of poverty, as 68% of families in the Lao Cai region in Vietnam live below poverty line. Also, we found that a burden of early marriages and motherhood was severely affecting girls in Kano State, Nigeria, as 39% of girls were married before the age of 18.

And also, we found that school exclusion was something that was very rife in the Zvishavane province in Zimbabwe, as 14% of girls in that province in Zimbabwe were found to finish upper secondary school.

[9:38]

O'DONOGHUE: Yeah, and, you know, in addition to some of those factors, which definitely are are really excluding girls from exercising their rights in many ways, we found across contexts that gender-based violence was a huge factor. Just to give an example, in the Karamoja region along the border of Kenya and Uganda, only about one in 10 girls are in secondary school, and sexual violence is heavily linked to school leaving and and girls not being able to continue in school.

In South Punjab, in Pakistan, we found that the unpaid care burden, which girls across the world are experiencing, but there in that context, you know, we found that it was really the rural girls, that rural girls were three times more likely to be out of school due to care and domestic work responsibilities.

And then finally, climate crisis and, you know, this is something that we have growing understanding of, of the gendered impacts of climate crisis. But in our work in Feni, in Bangladesh, we really saw that the way that that climate change events and sort of the impact of climate change has really collapsed family incomes, pushed girls out of school, into early marriages. And so, the climate crisis itself became another one of these factors that girls talked about that marginalized them and their communities.

[10:56]

OSSAI: Absolutely, Jenn. The girls' perspectives, which we just listened to really helps us, you know, appreciate the systems, the structures, the practices that, you know, work to basically reinforce these exclusionary effects. And like you pointed

out, you know, even research, well-intentioned, you know, could also create these outcomes.

And apart from even failure to create these participatory methods that, you know, LAAGA has been intentional to generate or develop or co-develop and co-author with girls, it's also interesting how ironically even efforts to protect girls; for instance, when I think about ethical requirements and how in wanting to protect the anonymity and the confidentiality of girls, we inadvertently also exclude girls from participating in, you know, the kinds of dialogues that provide a lot of sense-making around the experiences that they live through every day, and forces them into just being subjects from which we derive information rather than allowing, you know, them to be participatory and reflecting on the meanings of these experiences and also, you know, putting out, what they desire as better alternatives.

And and that's something that LAAGA is very intentional about, you know, departing from, which is why many of our research methods not only center the girls but also reflect with the girls. We do a lot of, you know, group reflective activities, peer reflective, peer, you know, discussion activities, all of which aim to make sense of the experience, you know, with the girls.

And even moving from there also help the girls articulate, or amplify the girls' voices in terms of what they want, what they desire. And basically expand agentic opportunities for the girls.

So I think, yeah, the Feni example really paints this picture of how the community, the family structures, the school structures, the norms, the laws, all working together, reinforce girls' exclusions in the sidelines.

[12:54]

O'DONOGHUE: And you know, I think that one of the key things that we understood in some sense in our sort of choice of this marginalization framing, but really came to understand in a much deeper way with the girls and communities was how these systems shift and how they are dynamic, and the importance of creating space for the people who are most impacted by them to name them themselves. Right?

And so, you know, you mentioned this, that we are not naming those systems. So, like, we didn't want to go into our research and say, "These are the things that exclude you," or, "These are the things that hold you back," but rather to really start by asking girls themselves, like, "Tell us about your experience."

And then to have them name that, and name that with one another, as you said, through doing some of that sort of peer conversations and reflection together. And, you know, really thinking of the ways in which those conversations and that research done with girls really revealed not just the systems that marginalize, but how the systems operate and how they come to play in the everyday decisions that girls are making, the ways in which these systems interact with norms, and and different sort of situational and contextual factors, and what that means.

And I think, for that, maybe we can go to our colleague, Joyce Kinyanjui in Kenya, who led our research with the girls there in the Karamoja.

[14:16]

KINYANJUI: The girls in Karamoja cluster that covers several countries in East Africa, they have their own understanding of what agency looks like. And when we went to research with the girls, we didn't bring our working definition on agency. We began by talking to them about goal setting. You know, setting their goals, their vision, you know, who enables, what doesn't enable them, the choices they make about leadership.

[14:53]

O'DONOGHUE: So let's hear from a girl in the Karamoja region, again, this is on the border of Kenya and Uganda.

[15:00]

GIRL in KARAMOJA: I can say this LAAGA Club, it has really helped me a lot. Because I can actually say I was not that much courageous to stand in front of people and speak up. And even sometimes I was not able to stand and to go to someone and tell the person my problems. But now I can ... I'm able to speak up my problems and identify my issues.

[15:28]

OSSAI: What we've listened to really illustrates or, you know, very strongly demonstrates how it's important to hear from the girls' voices directly, as opposed to coming to these conclusions from a distance.

We know that, you know, norms and laws and and families and communities often interact and basically it affect girls' lives. But hearing it in this way helps us to see in a very practical and relatable way how the systems are at work. The girls have painted the full picture, and from listening to them, you can see the interaction of the structural, the systemic. You can see the cultural. You know, all of these things make it clear how systems operate in everyday decisions. How, how far-reaching norms can be in confining or constraining girls in exercising their everyday agency.

So I think going to girls is, is really a powerful way to learn more and understand things in a much more lived way. I think the girls have advocated strongly for for this point.

[16:27]

O'DONOGHUE: Yeah. You know, when I think about this question of of of why girls in marginalized contexts, which I think we have been talking about as this, you know, this commitment to justice, this commitment to understand systems that are excluding people, this this commitment to do that work with people who are excluded.

You know, I think for us that is is foundational. And when I say us, I mean for LAAGA, right, and and the Learning Action Alliance for Girls Agency. That framing has really been foundational to us because it meant not only which girls did we want

to engage in the work, but how we were going to engage the girls in the work. And and we've started to talk about some of those participatory methods.

But, you know, again, this was really for the collective of us, both a natural extension of sort of our past experiences, our past values and commitments, this sort of shared commitment that we had across the network to do the research in ways that would be about agency itself.

And I remember from the early days in LAAGA, we started saying that we wanted to research with agency, for agency, and about agency. And I know often things can become sort of a preposition soup, but each one of those prepositions, right, is important to us and and we wanted to research with agency. Right? That that meant that we wanted to, through the process itself, create opportunities for all of us, the researchers, the co-researchers, young people, to express our agency and exercise our agency in the research process.

We wanted to research for agency, so we wanted that to be about ensuring that we were, you know, expanding the space for future agency through the research process. And we wanted to research about agency, so we wanted to really learn and understand what that meant.

And so I think again, you know, bringing that focus on on marginalization, as people who have been excluded, who often experience serious constraints on their agency, and a research process itself that really was about removing barriers, expanding space, and understanding the structural and the systemic change that needs to happen if we are really going to live in a world where all of us can more fully exercise our agency.

[18:40]

OSSAI: True, Jenn, and I think what you've said really just grounds even further our participatory research approach. Because we sort of, like, shifted away from frameworks that labeled girls as vulnerable populations and wanted to focus on empowering girls to saying, " Why don't we seek to understand girls better?"

Our method is not to study girls, but to engage with them, you know. So this is a kind of shift in research to say, we understand that research could have a an oxymoronic effect or paradoxical effect of marginalizing people by just seeking to study them.

You tend to, you know, isolate them, put them on this pedestal where you just want to observe them. But if we create methods that allow us to engage with people, then you discover that they're not, you know, as vulnerable as you think. They're exercising agency.

Our focus is on involving girls in constructing knowledge, you know, interpreting experiences and sharing their perspectives. So while research traditionally in the past would have gone to just, you know, ask them a couple of questions and taking it out into a different environment and sat together with a bunch of researchers saying, "Let's analyze this," we sit with the girls, you know, under these methods to also interpret the information, make sense of that experience that you just shared, and

then what perspectives, you know, come out of that. And as a result, we move from research to action all through that method.

So I think it's it's really interesting and it's worth emphasizing that research for us it's about impact. And it's not just impact today, it's sustained impact, and that's why we recognize that marginalization changes over time. And so we keep returning back to girls in these contexts to say, what's happening in your world?

And that's why there's such emphasis for us on group-based reflections, peer learning, you know, and shared problem-solving. I'm not sure of many methods in research that will work with the individuals that we're learning from to say, "How would you imagine a better future for yourself." Right? But under our participatory methods, we're sharing problem-solving.

So I think it really grounds our method of really distributing the power back to the girls, and that's really critical for this method. It's, you know, being willing to relinquish that power as a researcher and being, you know, very intentional about providing multiple entry points through which girls can express themselves and appreciate the world in which they live in and communicate that to, you know, others around them.

So I mean, for me, it's been really great really delving into marginalization and and I I think for me, my core message would be, inclusion is a justice, it's founded on justice, and we mustn't ever lose sight of that. And if we're thinking about justice, then, you know, you're going to be creative about how best to accomplish that through research.

[21:26]

O'DONOGHUE: Yeah. And you know, I think, you brought up the point that that LAAGA was not just a learning alliance, but it was an action alliance. And so thinking of, you know, how were we trying, again, from from our beginnings, right? So, like, often we as researchers, we might think about the research that we want to do, and we do that research, and then later we think about the type of impact that we want to have.

But I think for us, and this was one of the strengths of working as a collective, right? In our collective of 25 people, we really had folks who were more academic-type researchers. We had people who were practitioners, people who were educators, people who work in policy spaces. And so it was coming together to remind ourselves, right, that okay, yeah, while we're thinking about and designing the research, we also need to be already thinking about the impact and how that research is going to be brought into impact.

And, again, when we when we think about the marginalization framing and this move away from language like vulnerable or empowering, that's also about impact. Right? That's how we how we do research with people, but it's also about how we think about how impact happens. Because when we think about vulnerability, like, what is the policy or the practice response to vulnerability. Right? It's like, let me save you. Let me try to do something, right? And when we think about empowerment, right, the action is some external person who will come and to give you power. Right?

So I think for us, this was about moving away from that framing, both in the how we do research and what that means on the other side, right, of what the research is for and how impact becomes possible with girls, with communities, and not for girls and for communities.

I'll circle back after all of that to to really what you said, that, you know, this is about, again, that commitment to justice, that justice requires centering people who have been excluded, and that, you know, that means in the ways we do research and the ways we think about bringing that research into impact.

[23:24]

OSSAI: Absolutely. And I'll just put in this final reminder for any person who's doing work and working with excluded populations, excluded girls, I think it's important for us to keep in mind that when we think about marginalization, a lot of buzzwords exist out there. Like Jenn has talked about, there's "disadvantaged," there's "disempowered," or you hear things like "vulnerable." Right?

It's really important to look at this through a systems lens. You have to really view this, you know, through the surrounding systems. You have to find a way to understand the systems that are at work, and it's best understood through the lens of the person living out the experience. But what they share with you and their experiences every day points you to systems, surrounding systems, that confine them.

You have to take a look at it because these systems reveal the power dynamics that are at play that force these exclusions, whether it's geographic, whether it's social, whether it's, you know, political, whether it's through norms and laws. Systems exist and they create hierarchies and exclusionary effects. And when you understand the systems, you're in a better position, you know, to confront these inequitable systems or, you know, forces and and work with the girls to, again, create shared solutions. Right? And also work with communities to come about shared solutions.

It's been great sharing this, you know, topic and delving into this topic of marginalization on today's episode I enjoyed immensely. I hope you enjoyed listening. What about you, Jenn? What are your final thoughts for our listeners?

[24:54]

O'DONOGHUE: Yeah. No, I think, Edem, you really gave a teaser for what's upcoming, right, which is both about a deeper exploration of LAAGA's participatory approach. So today we've been talking a lot about the sort of why and some of the sort of high-level principles that guided that.

In the next episode, we'll be really delving into what we call our GCM, or our girl-centered methodology, that was developed over several years of research with girls and communities through LAAGA.

You also talked about the the bringing in and the work with communities, and so in future episodes we'll be talking about what we learned from the girl-centered methodologies, but how we brought that into communities and worked with

communities to make meaning of that, to take action of that, and to really think about, again, those systems that you emphasize so much and and, you know, what are the systems that most matter in specific contexts, and what are the actions that that we need to take. Right?

And when I say we, I mean sort of the whole ecosystem from the girl, her family, the educators around her, the policymakers in that space, moving up through, you know, researchers, up through the system, government, funders, all of this. So we'll be unpacking more of this. But in the next episode in particular, really look forward to delving into LAAGA's participatory research methodology.

OSSAI: Bye.

O'DONOGHUE: Thank you for joining us.

OSSAI: See you next time.

[music]

O'DONOGHUE: Thank you for listening to *Embedding Equality in Education*, a podcast from the Gender Equality in and through Education team in the Center for Universal Education at Brookings. Our sincere thanks to all the LAAGA members and others who contributed to this episode.

OSSAI: The show is produced and published by the Brookings Podcast Network. Thanks to the production team, including Ike Blake, supervising producer; Fred Dews, senior producer; Arushi Sharma, co-producer; Daniel Morales and Teddy Wansink, video producers; and Chris Chang, audio and video producer. Plus, thanks to Benji Aliaga and Madeline Chandler for their contributions to the show.

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I am Jenn O'Donoghue.

OSSAI: And I am Edem Ossai.

O'DONOGHUE: Thank you for listening.