

Embedding Equality in Education
A podcast from the Brookings Institution

"Strengthening the ecosystem around girls' agency: Commitment, capacity, and cohesion"

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Episode Summary:

In this episode of *Embedding Equality in Education*, hosts Jenn O'Donoghue and Edem Ossai explore why girls' agency can't be strengthened by working with girls alone. Girls across LAAGA's research described agency as tied to their families, teachers, faith leaders, and communities, and the systems around them. The hosts introduce LAAGA's "three Cs" framework for strengthening ecosystems: cohesion (a shared understanding), commitment (the will to act), and capacity (the ability to follow through). They draw on examples from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and Vietnam, including community dialogues, policy cafes, and girl-led clubs. They also ask listeners to consider what their own role could be in making change last after a project ends.

O'DONOGHUE: This episode contains mention of sexual violence.

There's a line we ended up putting at the end of every one of our LAAGA country reports. It's something like, "We all have a role to play in strengthening girls' agency." And I keep coming back to it because really it does mean all of us. Right?

OSSAI: Right. Families, educators, the district administrator, the village chief, the national lawmaker.

O'DONOGHUE: And me sitting here in Washington, and you, whoever you are listening to this right now.

OSSAI: Maybe you're a teacher or a parent, maybe you're working in ministry somewhere, maybe you're a funder.

O'DONOGHUE: Or maybe you're a researcher like us. So, as you're listening today, we'd love for you to keep a question in the back of your mind: what is my role in all of this? Or maybe even better, what could it be?

[music]

Welcome to the *Embedding Equality in Education* podcast. I'm Jenn O'Donoghue from the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution.

OSSAI: And I'm Edem Ossai, an education leader in Nigeria and a member of LAAGA, which is of course the Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency.

[1:09]

O'DONOGHUE: And today, as part of our ongoing conversation about girls' agency, we'll be talking about everyone and everything around girls, so, their families, their schools, their communities, the systems they live in, and why we have to work with all of that if we're serious about girls' agency.

OSSAI: In our last episode, we talked about localization, girls defining agency in their own words, in their own languages, and then taking that into conversation with their families and their communities.

O'DONOGHUE: Right, and something that came up there and honestly comes up every time we talk about this is that girls almost never described agency as something they do by themselves.

[1:46]

OSSAI: Correct. They talk about their mother, their father, the teacher, the elders, people who are supporting them, somebody who's holding them back. And our colleague from Zimbabwe, Pamhi, heard exactly this from the girls she worked with.

MHONGERA: Because to them, they said this is not an individual thing. They also need the support of the community, the support of the families for them to be able to exercise agency fully.

[2:17]

O'DONOGHUE: Which I mean isn't new. Right? Feminist scholars, including a lot of scholars from the Global South in particular, have been saying for a while now that agency is relational. But for some reason, when it gets turned into programs, gets turned into indicators, and it so often ends up being about the individual.

OSSAI: Right. Programs want to measure the girl. They want to measure her confidence, her skills.

O'DONOGHUE: Exactly. And the girls were telling us, "Wait, it's also about the people and the systems around me."

OSSAI: And if that's true, then you can't just work with the girl. You have to work with everybody around her as well.

O'DONOGHUE: So, that's today. This is part three of our Moving into Action conversation, and it's about the third principle of LAAGA's framework for transforming systems with and for girls' agency: strengthening ecosystems. So Edem, when we were prepping for today's episode, the first place you went was the Pakistan case study. Why that one?

[3:13]

OSSAI: Yes, Jenn. I went there because it's one example of a conservative context where girls named certain norms that limited the exercise of their agency. And there are the guardians of those norms, you know, the custodians, if you like. As girls and women in various contexts and spaces, we are usually governed by different social norms.

So, similarly with the girls in that context. And environments can be very suspicious of anything that alters life as they know it. Right? So, the idea of agency is often seen as a threat to the general order of the day.

So, through the focus groups and the storytelling sessions, the girls were able to point to key actors who shape their lives, who shape their aspirations, and how much they can decide for themselves.

And again, they don't necessarily use the word agency, but in the process of the discussions, a map of their community was built. The girls could see their communities very clearly. They could see people who enhanced their agency and those who restrained or constrained their agency. And it became very clear therefore, that agency is very relational, very, you know, systematically relational.

So, if you deviate from what is expected of you, people will definitely notice. And so, if the custodians of those norms are not carried along, if they don't have a shared understanding, then what we do is automatically put the girl at odds with her very own environment.

So, you know, what could potentially happen to her, we might make her stand out too loudly without any form of protection. The girl might not be prepared to navigate that kind of backlash. She's not even equipped to deal with it, and there's no

structural protection in that environment for her. And the backlash isn't from one or two people, actually, it's quite wide sweeping. It makes the girl a lone ranger, and in some places, that can actually become a matter of survival.

[5:12]

O'DONOGHUE: Yeah, you know, you're reminding me, Edem, of something similar that we heard in Bangladesh in the work that our colleague Nasrin led in the Feni District there. And, you know, there was one girl who said, "They won't let me study, but I'm definitely going to do it," which on the one hand, that's agency. Right? Like, she has clarity on on what she wants to do, and then she's going to do it.

But then she goes on to tell us, "I take the support from my teachers and my mother, and I move forward." So she's very clearly not doing it alone.

OSSAI: Exactly. So, you know, she's not under the spotlight by herself.

O'DONOGHUE: No, no. But then we'd hear from the other side too. So, another girl in Feni told us about her older sister, who she said held back from making her own choices because she was afraid of what the family would say.

OSSAI: And I I think it's important to say that these girls are not trying to break away from their families. They're not trying to do that at all.

O'DONOGHUE: No, not at all. And and, you know, what they described was actually wanting to hold all of it, their culture, their family, and their own goals. But when those pulled in different directions, they talked about feeling confused, feeling caught in the middle, caught in between.

[6:22]

OSSAI: And I really like that example because often the families are stuck too. Right? I mean, in the community dialogues, girls said their parents didn't necessarily want early marriages for them, but it was, you know, a factor of poverty that seemed to be pushing them to make those decisions.

O'DONOGHUE: Yeah, and this being in between can cost girls so much. And, you know, in the community dialogues in Karamoja, which again is on the Kenya-Uganda border, one of the girls told us about a really painful experience that she carried with her because she knew that her being in school meant that her sister could not be.

And she shared a story of how she had asked her parents not to marry her younger sister to an older man and and they had said to her, "You know, we can only afford school fees for one of them, so if you want her to be in school, why don't you pay her school fees?"

OSSAI: So, she speaks up for her sister, and then she's the one who pays for it.

Which is why you can't just work with girls alone, you know? If all we do is teach her to speak up for herself and self-advocate, and then we send her home to a family that's struggling, that hasn't been part of the conversation, then we are the ones who

have put her at direct odds, you know, with her familiar structures and her environment.

[7:39]

O'DONOGHUE: That's exactly it. We don't want to be putting girls at odds with their environments. We don't want to be saying to girls, "You go it alone," because then they assume all of the risk. And, you know, it's not only programs on the ground that sometimes do this. Our colleague, Sumbul Naveed, who has led LAAGA's work in Pakistan, told us about how she saw the same issue coming up with policymakers when they took the research to a policy dialogue with the education department in South Punjab. So, let's hear from her here.

[8:08]

NAVEED: A lot of the time people really forget that, you know, girls cannot be empowered when their, you know, circumstances, the whole ecosystem is not supportive to a certain level. That was also found while having that discussion with the policymakers, because they were also thinking more centering girls as compared to anyone else around them.

And everyone started recognizing the fact that even when we talk about schools or education policies or teachers training and curriculum, we only focus on girls and teachers. We are not talking about the society in general. We are not even talking about engaging parents or communities to ensure that the girls are able to not only just understand their agency, but also exercise it, put it into practice.

[8:54]

OSSAI: And it's the same thing we said earlier in the season. You know, we don't develop girls, girls develop themselves. What we can do is create the conditions around them. So agency is best exercised with the support of her family, her community, the institutions around her, not against them.

O'DONOGHUE: Exactly, exactly. And what you just described is the ecosystem. And when we talk about ecosystem, I know it can be this kind of jargony word.

OSSAI: Yeah, a bit.

[9:23]

O'DONOGHUE: But what we really mean by that is simply all of the people and the institutions around a girl that shape her life and that are connected to each other.

Let's hear actually from one of our colleagues who is one of the leaders of our research in Karamoja, Mary Otieno, who does put really simply what we're talking about when we talk about ecosystems.

[9:43]

OTIENO: The ecosystems of girls' agency is very broad, and includes community, includes the families where girls live. It includes the school. It also includes other

stakeholders within the environment, like the government, the civil society, the non-governmental organizations.

[10:14]

OSSAI: And every one of them can either open up space for girls' agency or close it down. I mean, I was talking earlier about the custodians of norms, and in many places, those include religious leaders. Right? But in the Nigeria research in Oyo State and Kano respectively, girls also named religious leaders as some of their biggest supporters.

So, one girl said, "Our imam uses encouraging words in the mosque." Another said, "Oh, I'm free in the church and I can make decisions." And in Zimbabwe, I recall girls described churches as places where they felt safe and supported, especially by the women there.

[10:50]

O'DONOGHUE: And we also heard about actors like village chiefs, right, who are frequently seen as as those custodians of norms that you mentioned earlier, Edam, but what we found can turn out to be allies. Right? In in Karamoja, the mothers talked about when a husband wanted to marry off a daughter, for example, that some of the women went to the village chief, and the village chief stepped in to stop that marriage.

And also, and really importantly, you know, for for our work and for the women and the girls we worked with in Karamoja, there was a a woman village chief there who was pointed out by the girls as being one of the greatest champions of girls' agency, and really she became one of the greatest champions of LAAGA's work in that area.

[11:36]

OSSAI: So, those examples show that the people you might expect to be gatekeepers can actually turn out to be allies. It depends on who is within that structure and what they understand as their role in relation to girls' agency.

And that's why in the community dialogues that we talked about in our last episode, we tried to bring in everybody that the girls told us mattered. This ranged from the chiefs, the district education officers, even the local police and, you know, the water authority was interesting, which tells you this, that this project has to be intergenerational. And it cannot be girls on one side and adults on the other side. It has to cut across sectors because a girl's life doesn't stay inside one ministry's mandate. Right? Or one box.

[12:20]

O'DONOGHUE: And, you know, Ellen Chigwanda, who's our LAAGA colleague leading the research in Zimbabwe, she really has a beautiful way of explaining why this intergenerational piece matters so much.

[12:33]

CHIGWANDA: So, intergenerational spaces are very important to the work on girls' agency in Zimbabwe for a couple of reasons. They're important firstly because as Zimbabwe, and I think Africa to a certain extent, we operate on a very important philosophy of ubuntu. A word that means is that "I am because you are."

So, the importance of intergenerational spaces is to ensure that whilst it's important for girls to understand agency and for them to define it for themselves, it is a concept that is relational. It's a concept that will need to interface with others. It's a concept that will need to connect with the agency of others.

I remember one of the issues that came up in our, you know, meeting that we had in Zvishavane was that some of the girls were saying agency should not be interpreted to mean disrespect. It should not be interpreted to mean, you know, violating other people's rights.

But it's understanding where you stand, understanding the future that you want, and working towards that future in an environment that where others are also exercising agency.

[13:46]

OSSAI: Oh, I really love the phrase, "I am because you are." So, when we say agency is relational, I think this really encapsulates what we mean. Yes, it's in the girl, but it also lives, you know, within all those relationships and within the ecosystem around her.

[14:02]

O'DONOGHUE: Yeah, and then the question becomes, okay, how do you actually strengthen all of that? And for us, that's where the three Cs come in. So, for me, this three Cs framework that we're gonna talk about today and that we use in LAAGA actually started with two Cs, and those two Cs were commitment and capacity.

And, you know, this came out of work that I'd been doing with colleagues in Mexico, and and what we found was that the move from policy on paper to truly transformative change that reaches schools, teachers, and young people requires that actors across the education system become agents of change.

So it's not just, you know, stakeholders sitting around a table or passive recipients receiving policy from on high. You can't just mandate from above and assume that everyone will want to make the change or that everyone will be able to make that change. So, those were the first two Cs. Right? That commitment and capacity.

And then our colleagues here at Brookings who work on systems transformation as well added a third C, which is cohesion. And this really means that people across an ecosystem actually share an understanding of what we're trying to do in the first place. So, now the model becomes three Cs: commitment, capacity, and cohesion.

And when we brought this three Cs model into LAAGA, Tran in Vietnam and Nasrin in Bangladesh, who were the first folks moving LAAGA's research into action, found

that it fit well with how LAAGA's work was evolving on the ground. And so, that ended up shaping how we think about this whole principle of strengthening the ecosystem around girls.

[15:39]

OSSAI: Yeah, and it's actually very simple. It's three questions. Cohesion: do we have a shared understanding of girls' agency? When we think about commitment, we're asking, do we want to support it? And then capacity, are we actually able to?

O'DONOGHUE: Right. So, it's sort of do we get it? Do we want it? Can we do it? Roughly.

OSSAI: Yeah, roughly. I love that, yeah. But I'll add that these are not a checklist. It's very important.

[16:05]

O'DONOGHUE: Right. And I and I really want people to hear that. You know, like agency itself, the three Cs are dynamic. You don't get to the point where you say, "Great, we have cohesion, commitment, and capacity. We're done." Right? It's not a checklist. It's more about where are we with these right now? What can we do to strengthen these? And how do we keep them in balance as things shift?

But let's unpack these three Cs a bit. Edem, why don't we start with cohesion? Because I know you have strong feelings about that one.

[16:32]

OSSAI: I do, I do. Cohesion is about arriving at a shared understanding. A shared understanding of what agency is, what girls are facing, what has to change. But you see, people often misunderstand this. They think that, you know, when we're seeking a shared understanding, we're talking about seeking compromise. Like, you're trying to please everyone. You're moderating the goal, negotiating until everyone is satisfied.

And and that's not what we mean. With cohesion, we're really talking about, you know, having enlightened conversations with everyone, because conversations really are transformative tools. A lot of the time, when people act against the interests of others, you find that it's because they've never really been in a space where they've had a real conversation about the impact of their actions, and even how that impact comes back to affect them. And so, when it becomes a matter of enlightened self-interest, you know, things begin to change.

[17:27]

O'DONOGHUE: Yeah, and so, where do you think that disconnect usually comes from?

[17:31]

OSSAI: I'm gonna say I think that often it's pretty much a lack of information or let me say distorted information. So, you know, like the phrase, "the danger of a single story." Right? People have been fed all of these narratives about the empowered woman, the woman in the city, the go-getter woman. And, you know, there's this idea that if a woman pursues a professional career, then she'll fracture her family, that, you know, she cannot keep her home. It's as if there's this binary where the two are contradictions, one of the other.

And so, they would rather throw the baby away with the bathwater. So, even if it means losing everything that the woman or the girl could potentially bring, you know, like say she goes and gets an accounting degree and comes back and improves how the family runs the farm, and that makes everyone benefit. Right? And the whole community is even elevated.

But, you know, oftentimes they would rather give that up because it looks to them as though they would have to sacrifice what they hold most dear, which is family. And they believe that agency represents a direct threat to what they hold as most dear, the concept of family.

[18:41]

O'DONOGHUE: And when they hear a different story?

[18:44]

OSSAI: So, that's why it's important for these conversations to occur, because when you create space for other stories, other truths, then people are willing to have a different conversation. But it takes time. It's a long process. Sometimes it takes a long time to convince someone about a long-held belief that they've had.

But it's an ongoing conversation. And that's what makes it an enduring win. If people truly buy in, then they become champions of it. So, they're not just bobbing their heads to save face, you know, because it sounds nice in a in a public space to approve of this. And then when they go home, they act differently or they say, "Well, these people just came and they talked their usual rubbish, you know, but this is how it's gonna be at home."

So, it's true. You know, there's often this split between what people perform outside and what really happens inside the home. Because when, you know, something is imposed on you externally and you're not really persuaded about it, then you're not going to act it out. We need to find that merger. We need that merger between the two, the harmony between who we are in our private lives and who we are publicly.

[19:50]

O'DONOGHUE: Right. We had some great examples of how LAAGA has created space for community dialogues in our last episode and and how that helps close this gap that you're talking about, right, that the gap between what people say outside and what happens at at home.

And and what we've seen is that girls have been such a big part of how that change happens. Right? And what we saw again and again across the country reports is that cohesion got stronger when girls were the ones sharing the research, sharing their experiences in the dialogues in their own words.

OSSAI: Absolutely. Absolutely.

[20:25]

O'DONOGHUE: Okay, so a second C, commitment, because you can have a shared sense of where you want to go, but still nobody moves. Right?

[20:34]

OSSAI: Yeah, that happens a lot, doesn't it? So, commitment is do people actually want this? Do they care enough about it to do something about it? And if they do, then it gets us to ask, "So what will you do?" So, you care enough about something, what are you going to do about it? That's commitment.

O'DONOGHUE: Right. And here's where with LAAGA, we've started talking a lot about champions. So, people who are committed to helping make change, who see themselves as part of that change.

OSSAI: Absolutely. And here again, through LAAGA, we are learning how girls' participation is really central to commitment. When people see girls, you know, when people see the girls, when the girls' experience becomes very visible to them, when they understand the impact, you know, of their actions on girls, then they start to see how things could be done differently. That's when they start to come around.

And every person who comes along wins the girl an ally. So, now, girls have more people championing their cause than they had at the beginning. And then you have to be ready to do something with that, with that energy, with that, you know, willingness. Our colleague, Arundhuti Gupta, who runs Mentor Together in India, visited Nasrin's work in Bangladesh just as the research phase was wrapping up, and she saw exactly this and shares it with us.

[21:49]

GUPTA: What was so visible on the ground was that there was truly a coalition of actors who wanted to do more about this topic. Right? They were brought together , on this topic of agency and I think it resonated with them. They were keen to see the next phase.

And I think if it had stopped just then they would have been like, wait, nothing has changed for us. So, you've gotten us all aligned in a very, like, you know, cohesive way and now what?

And I think that action space is really critical to, in a way, give people hope that things can change.

[22:22]

OSSAI: So, that was Arundhuti and she asked the question, and now what? So, that's the question every community will ask you, and they're very right to do so.

O'DONOGHUE: Right. For me, you know, Vietnam is a case I often think of here. And Tran, who led that work, had decided right from the start that, that LAAGA's research couldn't just end with a report on a website, but really had to be about engaging the local ecosystem.

[22:48]

TRAN: I think, right at the beginning, I actually try to to move away from the idea that research should end up in a report. That instead I want to make it something that spark ongoing conversation with the community.

So, we did that by bringing the findings back to the the location of the research where the research actually happened. For example, in Lao Cai in 2024, we brought together girls and local officials and teachers and parents and media. And this is not just about presenting the findings, it's about creating the space so that everyone can share their their own experience, their perspective, and then reflect on what girls' agency really look like in their own context.

[23:39]

OSSAI: Creating the space. Yeah, and that's where the champions come from. That was a good account from Tran.

O'DONOGHUE: Exactly, exactly. But it also, you know, created a real tension for me as a as a researcher. Tran and I were there in Vietnam. We were having these amazing conversations with communities, with policymakers. People were super interested. They were engaging. They wanted to take it further. They were talking about how they could get it into policy. They were committed with a capital C. Right?

But at the same time, we had these other pressures on us as researchers and, you know, we needed to get the report done. We needed to get that published out into the broader world. That was part of our commitment.

And I do understand that both things matter. Right? But I live that and the, you know, as this real tension between, you know, windows opening on the ground, people committed right then. But we as the researchers who were were working in the space only had so much time and energy, so it was really a question of where do we put it?

[24:37]

OSSAI: Yeah. So, you know, that's the thing about commitment. It sounds good hearing it, but it doesn't keep to your schedule. It's when people are saying, "So what next?" You know? That's the moment you need to really act on it. If you say, "Oh, wait, let me finish my report first," you know, you lose that momentum. That energy can cool.

So, part of our commitment at LAAGA is also being ready to move when they move, when the stakeholders move.

O'DONOGHUE: And balancing the commitment of actors across multiple ecosystems.

And then the third one, capacity, because people can understand, they can want the change and still not have what they need to actually do it.

OSSAI: True that. Resources, knowledge, support from their institutions, and even just the space to act. Right?

[25:24]

O'DONOGHUE: And this is one where I always want to push a little bit because when people hear capacity building, they often think, "Oh, okay, a training." Right? And trainings are good, of course, but when we talk about capacity, we're actually talking about the system. Right?

So, it's not only whether one teacher has the skills or the know-how to support girls' agency. It's whether the school and everything around that teacher actually make it possible for her to use those skills.

[25:52]

OSSAI: Yes. And in Nigeria, Adefunke, our colleague, colleague took that system question straight to government during the policy dialogue event that she organized. So, she didn't just bring, you know, the education ministry. Let's listen to her account of that.

[26:07]

EKINE: We had different ministries involving the girls, education, health, women and social development, and then even justice, because we just found out that some of these things have a lot of other effect on the girls. Because a girl that was raped and did not finish school, you have to get the justice ministry involved.

The current government, though not because of our work alone, but because of the work that other people are doing concerning girls, they have done what we called Second Chance School. They opened the Second Chance School for Girls in the marketplace.

And one of the recommendations we gave them, gave the government, was that they should extend it to the community where we worked.

Most times interventions are within the urban, but we're saying outskirts in the rural places where the girls are, we could extend this kind of a second chance opportunity for them.

[27:16]

O'DONOGHUE: Right, and and, you know, Adefunke's is a great example of what we mean when we talk about the system. So, she's talking about a program that already exists, but the question is whether it is reaching the girl who needs it the most.

OSSAI: Precisely, and, you know, she's building on something that's already there, which is very important, so because that's what you want. You're not coming in with something new that could disappear when the project ends.

O'DONOGHUE: Which for me is kind of the real question about capacity. Right? Is it still happening after we leave?

OSSAI: A very crucial question, and I think it's really the test for capacity, isn't it? It's not what happened while we were there. It's really whether the people in that community can keep it going and can grow it after we leave. That's the real deal.

[28:00]

O'DONOGHUE: Okay. There's one more piece I really want us to mention today because it sits across all of these three Cs, and that is coordination. So, you know, a few years ago, I came across this report that found that the biggest gaps for young people were often the gaps between institutions, so between school and work, between families and schools, between communities and schools.

And those in-between spaces are often where we expect young people to just make their own way on their own.

[28:30]

OSSAI: Yeah, and that's where young people, interestingly, especially from more marginalized contexts, often fall through the cracks. You know, that's literally why we have that expression. Right?

So, the question is, who is taking on the responsibility for coordination when we think about girls' agency? Because very often, it's nobody.

[28:51]

O'DONOGHUE: It's nobody. Right? And and this makes me think of our experience in Kenya, and, you know, as part of our work in the Karamoja region there, we held a roundtable in Nairobi with about 20 civil society organizations, all of them working with girls in the Karamoja region.

And when we mapped out what everyone was doing, it was things like life skills, mentorships, scholarships, menstrual health— all really good and very important work. But everyone was sort of doing it on their own and and they realized that most frequently they weren't really even talking to each other.

And, you know, of course, I don't think that we changed the world because we got everybody together for one day. But even creating that space, that one day, people

were like, "Oh, this is what I'm doing. Oh, you're doing that? Maybe we could do this together." And that's beginning to weave that cohesion. Right?

OSSAI: Yeah, it is. And and you see it's touching all the three Cs. So, they are discovering each other, they're understanding each other, they're getting committed, and they're putting what they have together.

O'DONOGHUE: Yes. Actually, you're right, three Cs in action. And I'm also reminding myself that we should follow up to see if they've stayed in touch.

[30:02]

OSSAI: Very important. Very important.

So, now we've talked about all of the three Cs, but Jenn, I'm gonna have to ask, what does all of this actually look like in LAAGA's work?

[30:12]

O'DONOGHUE: So, it really depends on the place. In each context, we start with the community dialogue that we talked about in the last episode, and we also try to bring in local policy actors through what we call policy cafes. These are essentially intergenerational convenings, so the girls are there, their families, educators, civil society organizations, policymakers, the media come into those spaces.

And, you know, we get everyone in the room together and they talk through the research together and then really start to explore what is being done at the policy level right now, what could shift at the policy level to better support girls' agency.

And, you know, from those dialogues and working with local champions, LAAGA teams then have started to build all kinds of next steps that are again, really defined starting with the girls, starting with their communities, and then in their local ecosystems.

But so, these next steps include things like toolkits, trainings, multimedia storytelling, girls agency clubs.

[31:14] **OSSAI:** Wow! Yeah, Jenn, thank you. You've painted a very visual picture. And our colleague, you know, Nasrin, who led our work in Bangladesh, has a very good example of how those clubs started, you know, pulling in officials who'd never really engaged with girls before. And in fact, one education official came to a session and told the girls that they could call at any time, even at midnight, if they had a problem. Let's listen to Nasrin.

[31:37]

SIDDIQA: So, officials also came to know that, yes, we need to organize this type of program, and you'd be very happy to know that now regularly they are doing it as these schools had already opened the girls' agency clubs. So, they are inviting them and they're coming and conducting some sessions. So, they say that it actually it is in our rules that we have to do this session. But unfortunately due to business or something, we could not.

OSSAI: So, it was already in their rules, you know? They just weren't doing it. And the girls club gave them a reason to and a place to show up.

O'DONOGHUE: Exactly. And, you know, the clubs matter so much to the girls themselves. So, here's one of the girls in in Karamoja talking about that.

[32:23]

KARAMOJA GIRL: Like for example, I can say this LAAGA club is helping us girls to be able to speak up our problem and identifying our problems together with the solutions. So I do feel that girls are, are influencing so that they can be able to speak up their problems and participate in.

[32:44]

OSSAI: Wow, very interesting. And then there are the tools that were co-created with girls and communities in Vietnam. So, Tran and the girls, you know, in Vietnam built a toolkit together and then something really nice happened when the girls took it into what they call Change Champions Club.

[33:04]

TRAN: And in the next phase of the research, with also take one step further by turning the research into something practical when we developed the tool kit together with the girls. And then the the girls did not just participate in the session, but they became the facilitator when the Change Champions Club as a part of the national program, for the ethnic minority girls and women in the mountainous region.

And it's, these club are conducted at schools. So, in the Change Champions Clubs, girls, trained girls, led session for the others so they can keep the conversation going beyond us. And and I think that is one change in the ecosystem.

[33:51]

O'DONOGHUE: Keep the conversation going beyond us. And that's it. Right? That's the answer to whether it's still happening after we leave. And actually, I have an update since we interviewed Tran about this. You know, as we speak, the girls from Muong Khuong, which is where we did our initial research, are traveling with their teachers and district officials to another part of the province to lead agency dialogues with other girls there.

And people from the central government are are tagging along on the trip because they want to learn from the girls themselves, from the people, from the teachers and the municipal actors about what implementation of their national policy looks like when it's being led by girls.

So, coming back to where we started, I want to speak directly to whoever's listening for a minute. What does all this mean for you? What is your role in this?

[34:41]

OSSAI: Think about where you have influence, your classroom, your home, your organization, wherever it is. What would help strengthen your commitment, your capacity, and cohesion across that space to support girls' agency?

[34:56]

O'DONOGHUE: And honestly, as we think about our role, that means becoming more aware of the ideas we carry and the stories we tell. What are the narratives we carry about girls in marginalized contexts?

You know, I just took part in LAAGA workshops across four countries in Africa, Asia, and across the Americas, and in every room at some point we heard some version of, "Oh, well, it's the culture there." Like, like that explains everything. But that kind of narrative really shuts down the space for girls' agency before a girl has even said a word.

OSSAI: And those single stories are exactly what we're trying to undo with the communities. It's the same work for us.

O'DONOGHUE: Yeah. So, this is collective work. It's on all of us.

OSSAI: So, if all of you listening take one thing from today, I'd say it's this: a girl's agency is tied up with the people, relationships, and the systems around her. So, we have to work with all of them, not just with her.

O'DONOGHUE: And the three Cs give us a way to move into action, to identify what needs to be done to strengthen that ecosystem for girls' agency. Do we understand it together? Do we want it? Can we do it?

OSSAI: And who's connecting it all? Who's carrying everybody along?

O'DONOGHUE: Right, carrying everyone along. We all have a role to play.

OSSAI: So, next time, we're looking at the power running through these systems. Back in episode two, you'll recall we talked about marginalization as something that's produced by systems of power, by the way resources and voice get distributed.

So, in our next episode, we'll look at how girls and their communities name those structures that are holding them back, and what it looks like to actually challenge those power dynamics.

O'DONOGHUE: And we'll hear from LAAGA members and from girls about what it felt like to do that because it's hard, it's slow. You have to keep coming back to it and, you know, you have to keep looking at yourself, too, and your own relationship to power, which I think, Edem, you and I are both going to have a lot to say about.

So, thanks for listening, everyone. I'm Jenn O'Donoghue.

OSSAI: And I'm Edem Ossai. Thank you so much for listening.

[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.

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I am Jenn O'Donoghue.

OSSAI: And I am Edem Ossai.

O'DONOGHUE: Thank you for listening.