



VOICE, CHOICE AND POWER

Evidence and Recommendations for Increasing Girls' and Young Women's Agency and Decision-Making Through U.S. Foreign Assistance



Four in ten people alive today are under the age of 25. That means that children and youth comprise roughly 42 percent of the world's population (Khokhar, 2017). A majority live in low- and middle- income countries, nearly half of which are in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Economic Forum, 2018). This concentration of young people has ignited policymaker interest in unlocking the so-called "demographic dividend," or the potential for greater economic returns when a young generation is positioned to thrive (Barre et al., 2018).

But how? Often, policymakers and development practitioners focus on assets and opportunities that young people must be equipped with to meaningfully contribute to the communities and society around them—for example, school access, job training or employment opportunities. However, an often-overlooked success factor that research increasingly shows is critical to young people's ability to capitalize on those assets and opportunities is personal empowerment, or the ability of young people to make and act on their own decisions regarding crucial life choices, such as education, employment and family formation. Work by ICRW and others shows that when youth have the agency to make key decisions for themselves across all aspects of their lives—from health, education, marriage, family planning, household expenditures, and beyond—they are more likely to grow into successful, healthy adults (Patton et al., 2016).

WHAT IS AGENCY AND WHY WE SHOULD CARE ABOUT IT FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN?

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) defines agency as individuals' capacity to take deliberate actions to achieve desires and preferences in their lives (Edmeades et al., 2018).

There are three critical, interrelated processes of agency: voice, choice and power. *Voice* refers to an individual's ability to actively advocate for what she or he wants. *Choice* is the ability to make and influence decisions. *Power*—the enabler of both voice and choice—is the ability to be influenced by or influence others and can enable or constrain agency. Power operates in visible and invisible ways (Eerdewijk et al., 2016).

For young people specifically, ICRW defines agency as the condition when **"youth perceive and have the ability to employ their assets and aspirations to make or influence their own decisions about their lives and set their own goals, as well as to act upon those decisions in order to achieve desired outcomes"** (Hinson et al., 2016).

For girls and young women, gender plays a role in determining their ability to express all three elements of agency. Decisions like whether and when to marry, whether to stay in school and for how long, whether and when to have children, which family planning method to use and how to earn a living are just some of the considerations for girls and young women.

The level of agency in a decision-making process and the types of decisions made may also depend on a girl's age and development stage, which can vary greatly between the ages of 10 and 24. Agency is also a relational concept; although a girl or young woman may have agency in some relationships (e.g., peers), she may not have as much in others (e.g., parents or husband). (Edmeades et al., 2018)

In other words, the kinds of decisions girls and young women influence depends on their age, developmental stage and the types of relationships they are in. For example, relevant decisions for younger girls may include decisions around whether and where to attend school. Given social and legal frameworks in most contexts, it is unlikely that a girl would be

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—(HINSON ET AL., 2016)

allowed to enroll herself in school. So, decisions at this developmental stage would be made in consultation with adult caregivers, or by adult caregivers on the girl's behalf. For girls who are married as children or young women, decisions about their households and children are often influenced by marital partners.

A GIRL-CENTERED APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT?

ICRW and others' research suggests that having or desiring decision-making agency has implications for girls' and young women's ability to use family planning, control household resources and expenditures, all of which are highly relevant to broader development goals.

In Nigeria, for example, one ICRW study found that **young women with a preference for joint decision-making (to have a share in household decision-making with their spouses) were more likely to use family planning (John 2018)**. Similarly, married women aged 15 to 24 in two districts of Jharkhand, India, who were categorized as having high decision-making power in their relationship, were significantly more likely to report having ever used or currently using a method of family planning (Gautam et al., 2018). As such, improving girls' and young women's agency can advance improved reproductive, maternal and child health outcomes.

Whether or not a girl gets married as a child has implications for her decision-making power later in life. As child marriage becomes an increasing area of focus in U.S. foreign assistance, it is important to consider the long-term impacts the harmful practice has on multiple areas of a girl's life, including her decision-making power not just as a child bride, but throughout her life. Findings from another ICRW study in Nigeria suggest that **women who were married as children (when one or both parties was under the age of 18) have much less decision-making agency than those who were married later (Sebany, 2018)**. Similar findings have been reported in a multi-country Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) analysis, which found that in one third of the studies included being married as a child reduced women's decision-making ability (Wodon et al., 2017).



YOUNG WOMEN WITH A PREFERENCE FOR JOINT DECISION-MAKING (TO HAVE A SHARE IN HOUSEHOLD DECISION-MAKING WITH THEIR SPOUSES) WERE MORE LIKELY TO USE FAMILY PLANNING.

—(JOHN, 2018)



Finally, there are indications that increased agency for girls also has potential to improve economic development outcomes. An ICRW evaluation among ever-married couples in Ethiopia found that the a CARE program working to build agency and enhance decision-making showed improvement in income-generation activities and paid employment, as well as increases in savings and loan opportunities.


GIRL POWER: PROMISING APPROACHES TO IMPROVE GIRLS' AGENCY IN U.S. FOREIGN ASSISTANCE.

Not only is there growing evidence that improving girls' and young women's agency would advance broader development goals, but ICRW and other evidence also indicates that there are promising approaches that could be replicated in U.S. foreign assistance.

An **ICRW-led literature review on adolescents and family planning** concluded that working directly with married adolescent girls and their families, along with facilitating peer-to-peer educational interventions, can improve their agency for family planning use (Glinski et al., 2014).

In the **TESFA (Towards Economic and Sexual Reproductive Health Outcomes for Adolescent Girls) project** in Ethiopia, it became evident that providing married adolescent girls aged 10 to 19 with sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and economic empowerment information and services, as well as communication and negotiation techniques, increased their feeling that they have a say in household decision-making and that their

opinions matter, especially in terms of family planning (Edmeades et al., 2016). These decisions included ones about whether to work, how to use earnings and whether the girl had a large degree of control over her earnings and decisions around savings, taking loans and other household financial decisions.



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—(SEBANY, 2018)



In the **Planning Ahead for Girls' Empowerment and Employability (PAGE) project** in New Delhi, school-age girls 15 to 17 years old who were exposed to a curriculum about empowerment and employability saw a statistically significant increase in their reported ability to say who and when to marry by the end of the program (Nanda et al., 2017). The empowerment component of the curriculum focused on building girls' understanding of gender and power and developed their self-efficacy skills. Under the employability component, the girls were given concrete pathways to envision career possibilities. This component also included skill-building and interaction with employment partners through school-based career events, during which information was provided to advance the girls' understanding of and interest in various career paths. PAGE has helped girls to not only have aspirations for a better future, but to map out how to achieve their career aspirations.

Programs that aim to build agency writ large for girls have shown improvement across a broad range of areas. For example, ICRW's **PAnKH (Promoting Adolescents' Engagement, Knowledge and Health) program** in Dhoplur, Rajasthan India focuses on enhancing life-skills, knowledge, agency and empowerment to have a positive impact on married and unmarried 12- to 19-year-old girls, especially in

education and marriage. Results show that older girls who received the PAnKH intervention are less likely to be married as children than girls in control groups, indicating growth in individual agency (ICRW, IFS & Manjari Foundation, 2019).

These promising programs, alongside other evidence, indicate that increasing girls' and young women's agency improves development outcomes in meaningful ways, and that agency has potentially enormous ripple effects above and beyond decision-making at the household level and into the overall health, safety, and economic empowerment of those who are able to express their voice, choice and power. As such, investments to increase girls' agency and decision-making power such as those above merit consideration across a number of different U.S. foreign assistance areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AND ASSISTANCE

These findings demonstrate that agency as both a means and an end have valuable implications for girls and young women, as well as for advancing broader development goals. U.S. foreign policy and assistance is increasingly being used as a tool to advance the rights and empowerment of young people and adolescent girls. ICRW's evidence indicates that this trend should be expanded and that specific investments in girls' and young women's agency should be included within broader efforts to empower women and young people. There are several immediate opportunities for policymakers to accomplish this:

- ◆ Within the Trump Administration's newly-launched Women's Global Development and Prosperity (WGDP) Initiative, implementing agencies should include a focus on women's and girls' agency and decision-making. These activities should be promulgated under the initiative's third pillar, which focuses on the enabling environment for economic empowerment. This pillar contains strong language on the importance of changing social norms but currently lacks any references to agency in economic decision-making.
- ◆ Fully fund and implement the *U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls*, a multi-agency effort to advance girls' health, rights and empowerment. The Strategy's third principle includes a specific focus on

providing girls with the skills, services, information and support to make decisions about their own lives—in other words, agency. The Strategy includes implementation plans for USAID, MCC, Peace Corps and the State Department against those principles. As each implementation plan is applied, agency should be included as a key part of that work and transparently measured and reported on to Congressional and civil society stakeholders. A CSIS Task Force convened by CSIS and including bipartisan Members of Congress and development experts recommended funding these kinds of activities at \$250,000,000 annually (Gayle and Hammergren, 2017).



FACILITATING PEER-TO-PEER EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS CAN IMPROVE THEIR AGENCY FOR FAMILY PLANNING USE.

– (GLINSKI ET AL., 2014)



- ◆ Given the clear evidence that married girls exhibit decreased agency throughout the remainder of their lives, increased funding should go towards stand-alone programming to end child marriage and to address the needs of already married girls.¹
 - Congress should allocate funding to end child marriage at the Congressional Budget Office's recommended \$24 million (Congressional Budget Office, 2012).
 - ◆ Reinstate funding for UNFPA, one of the premier agencies in the world doing work at the intersection of family planning and adolescence, as well as key work across the UN system on harmful practices like female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and child marriage. These UN joint programs support the holistic needs of girls and contribute to their ability to have greater agency. Specifically, Congress should fund:
 - The UNFPA/UNICEF joint program - the largest
- ◆ PEPFAR'S DREAMS programming should include an increased focus on girls' agency, which will lead to improved health and economic outcomes for girls. DREAMS is an ambitious partnership which aims to reduce HIV infections among adolescent girls and young women in 10 sub-Saharan African countries. The goal of DREAMS is to help girls develop into Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored and Safe women. The "empowered" component of this work has increased school enrollment and attendance, encouraged livelihoods programming that includes job placement and otherwise sought to support an enabling environment around the issue of HIV/AIDS to support girls, and would be a logical area to house increased programming on girls' agency in the future.
 - ◆ Fully fund and remove restrictions from U.S. family planning assistance, the area of development assistance in which the most evidence exists pointing to direct links between girls' agency and development outcomes. Congress should fully fund at \$1.66 billion, including \$111 million for UNFPA, which research indicates would be the United States' fair share of bilateral family planning funds (PAI, 2018; Guttmacher, 2019). This funding will only be effective with the repeal the Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance Policy, also known as the Global Gag Rule, which greatly restricts the scope and impact of U.S. family planning assistance. An essential component of girls' and women's agency with regard to family planning is the availability and choice among a mix of methods, which is greatly constrained under this policy.

program of its kind - on FGM/C, at no less than \$5 million dollars, consistent with FY17, FY18 and FY19 appropriations.

- The UNICEF/UNFPA joint program on child marriage, to which the US has not contributed in the past, but which works to fund grassroots and other organizations, and has supported the development of global, regional and national frameworks, targets and accountability mechanisms on FGM and child protection. This program should similarly be funded at no less than \$5 million dollars.

¹Evidence from ICRW and World Bank research on the economic costs of child marriage found that investments in ending the practice could reduce high-prevalence countries' dependence on foreign assistance. This data demonstrates a case for a high return on investment beyond individual and family level returns in this area.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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