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Cover: Images of Empowerment

Measuring Girls' Empowerment

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THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF EMPOWERMENT FOR GIRLS

Empowering girls (commonly defined as aged 10 to 19) to improve their health and well-being is critical to their success and that of their communities. Young girls face many hardships in low- and middle-income countries, including early marriage and pregnancy. Globally, every year, 12 million girls marry before their 18th birthday.[1] In sub-Saharan Africa, 35 percent of girls will be married and 45 percent will become pregnant by the age of 18. [1,2] The poorest girls are exceptionally vulnerable and three times more likely to marry before the age of 18 than those from richer households. [3] Early marriage and childbearing have lifelong impacts for young girls, including lower educational attainment compared to boys[4,5] and reduced economic earning potential.[4]

Gender equality and empowerment for women and girls is one of the Sustainable Development Goals. [6] Many investments have been made to support young girls to thrive, avoid early marriage and childbearing and stay in school. One increasingly common approach has been through empowerment programming. In its broadest definition, empowerment is a process by which individuals can expand their choices, strengthen their voice, and exercise control over their lives. [7,8] Yet, the concept of empowerment and its operationalization into programs is often poorly defined and hard to measure.

Until recently, the use of empowerment concepts and their operationalization have not been applied to girls programming, but instead only to women. Key concepts of women's empowerment include agency, voice, choice, power and resources. Collectively, these concepts underlie the expansion of women's opportunities, strengthen women's voices, and transform actions to improve wellbeing. [7,9,10] One of the main challenges of applying these empowerment concepts to girls is that they have not yet experienced the life events on which most empowerment models are predicated. Many of the empowerment conceptual and measurement advances – such as in the economic, sexual and reproductive health, and political domains – have little relevance to girls. This is because girls are not yet

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making decisions for their own health and well-being within marriage, nor controlling financial resources, voting, owning land, inheriting property or taking on political and governmental positions.[11]

There is growing importance of empowerment as a critical approach to support girls across the globe, yet challenges remain. In this brief, we highlight some of the key advances for conceptualizing and measuring empowerment for girls and suggest considerations for next steps.

MEASURING EMPOWERMENT FOR GIRLS

There are several empowerment frameworks for "women and girls," some broadly applicable[7, 12, 13, 14, 15,16] and others more specific to the domain of sexual and reproductive health.[9,10] These frameworks have built off each other and provide a rich theoretical and conceptual foundation for how to approach empowering women and girls.

It is not surprising, therefore, that those aiming to address girls' empowerment have started with the concepts found in these frameworks. Most research has focused on individual constructs; for example, agency (either operationalized as self-worth or self-efficacy),[17, 18] decision-making,[17] voice,[11, 18] and mobility.[11, 17] However, the literature is disparate, and each study differs in geography, age group and construct. For example, JeJeebhoy (2010) used "agency" as an umbrella term for mobility, decision-making and self-worth with young men and women aged 15 to 24 in Pune, India[17] whereas Zimmerman (2019) et al's work studied voice, mobility, behavioral control and decision-making among adolescents ages 10-14 in several global settings.[11] Beyond using these individual-level metrics, empowerment has also been defined as having assets in the social, economic and health domains, such as knowledge, skills (e.g. literacy), gender norms and self-efficacy.[18]

Many of these studies included robust validation of empowerment concepts for girls in multiple settings. For example, of the empowerment constructs that Zimmerman et al tested (voice, freedom of movement, behavioral control and decision-making), many were shown to be measurable and form a valid concept among girls ages 10-14 – especially voice. However, some scales failed to work well in certain countries, despite removing items that loaded poorly.[11]

Although burgeoning evidence suggests the constructs and measurement tools are valid and reliable, the evidence has been mixed as to whether these constructs influence outcomes of interest, such as contraceptive use. For example, in a recent evaluation in Zambia (2020), authors concluded that their assets-based measures of agency did not predict educational and fertility outcomes among their population of adolescent girls.[18]

Adolescents are a heterogenous group – some are married while others are out of school; they are unique in the vulnerabilities they experience. As such, not all constructs universally resonate. Zimmerman et al found that some of their constructs (e.g. agency) were not as relevant for adolescents with more limited choice, which they attribute to younger adolescents having less agency.[11] Evidence from Zambia showed that vulnerable girls were less susceptible to empowerment programming, suggesting that these girls may need additional programmatic support.[18]

As is true for all measurement tools, a recurring quest in the field of girls' empowerment is for the balance between standardized measures and measures that validly reflect unique, local contexts. For example, while the subscale of "voice" appeared to be universal across sites, the other two constructs—freedom of movement and behavioral control and decision-making—were less so; the authors concluded that there may be specific items that were less relevant in some contexts.[11]

NEXT STEPS

Conceptualization and measurement of empowerment for girls in unique contexts around the world is still nascent. It is promising that constructs like agency, voice, choice and mobility appear to resonate with girls, and are measurable and theoretically connected to positive development outcomes.

However, several large research gaps exist. For one, it is not known whether empowering a girl in one domain (e.g., boosting self-efficacy to use a condom with a boyfriend) will empower her elsewhere (e.g., enhance her confidence to advocate for political rights), nor whether an overall empowerment strategy will trickle down across all domains. Girls have different relationships in their lives, each with embedded power differentials, and we can and should expect that empowerment will change depending on that context—yet little research has explored this. In addition, there is a dearth of research on whether and how empowerment is sustained beyond the life of empowerment programs.

As is true in all fields, there is tension between standardized and context-specific measures. Understanding how context plays a role in empowerment will help to alleviate that tension. A girl's ability to be empowered is shaped by family dynamics, community and culture—all which are locally constructed. Although not focused exclusively on girls, Moreau et al's recent work validating an SRH empowerment scale found a mix of universally salient and contextually unique constructs. The authors conclude there is need for empowerment indicators that allow comparison across space and time but also reflect a diversity of community perspectives.[19]

A comprehensive, evidence-based framework specific to girls is desperately needed. Existing frameworks that lump girls in with women obfuscate specific life course needs and

realities that girls experience. A stand-alone framework will help to show girls' empowerment in a world where many still view girls as children without rights. Even within the seemingly narrow band of adolescence, appreciation of the differences by age, life stage and evolving capabilities including girls with disabilities is needed—a sentiment echoed in Zimmerman et al's findings that showed constructs did not universally resonate across ages.[11] In addition, the fact that vulnerable girls and girls in severely restricted environments are less likely to be influenced by empowerment programming or find key empowerment constructs relevant to them indicates that a universal, one-size-fits-all framework even for girls' empowerment is insufficient.

There is also need to step away from individual aspects of empowerment and consider the enabling environment that surrounds girls. As has been noted, most evidence to date has focused on empowering girls individually by building their agency, but in some cases, this has not translated into positive, longer-term outcomes for girls. Family and community structures play a critical role in girls' lives; evidence suggests that multi-component empowerment programming is more successful than singular programming, even for very young adolescents.[14] This was suggested by Austrian et al as a reason why their program did not result in changes in social, health and economic assets.[18] There is ample evidence of the importance of adults and role models in girl's lives.[20,21] It must be considered how the enabling environment is critical to empowering girls – and along with that, the specific mechanisms, pathways and measures of that enabling environment. One way to learn more about the enabling environment for girls' empowerment is to learn from other fields of study. For example, there is much to be gleaned from a positive youth development (PYD) approach. In fact, a PYD framework with a dedicated enabling environment domain offers several critical constructs that help build girls' assets and agency.[20]

Yet, behind these needs are lingering questions about the notion of empowerment itself as an approach for enhancing outcomes for girls. The field needs to critically reflect on how it is approaching conceptualization and measurement of empowerment for girls. Thurs far, researchers and practitioners invested in girls' empowerment have taken mostly Eurocentric approaches to their work, which have been useful but insufficient. Most researchers have superimposed constructs from existing empowerment frameworks for women onto girls. It is time to take a true empowerment-based approach. Future research should work from the ground-up, starting with rich anthropological and qualitative data to build frameworks that validly represent girls' empowerment and local translation of specific empowerment notions. In addition, defining empowerment for girls must be done alongside girls, not for girls. Finally, it must be appreciated that empowerment may not always be the best or most appropriate approach to improve girls' outcomes.

Adolescence is a critical time, especially for young girls. Girls' empowerment is heralded as a key investment to reach our international commitments. While we have made significant progress in understanding how to conceptualize and measure it, with additional

collaborations, partnerships and research, we will continue to push new research/approaches to the field.

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