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7-2023

## Data Brief—Agency

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### Recommended Citation

Engebretsen, Sarah. 2023. "Agency," Girls Deliver Pre-Conference on Adolescent Girls Data Brief. New York: Population Council.

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# Girls Deliver

PRE-CONFERENCE ON ADOLESCENT GIRLS  
KIGALI, RWANDA • 16 JULY 2023

## ROUNDTABLE SESSION DATA BRIEF

### AGENCY

Practitioners, governments, and other stakeholders agree that adolescent girls’ agency is important for affecting change in their own lives and in their communities. But there is **little consensus on how to define it**,<sup>1</sup> and **limited evidence on how to measure and achieve it**. Agency measures tend to be one-dimensional (e.g. focusing on one measure such as freedom of movement). Evidence is lacking on how agency relates to girls’ education, sexual and reproductive health, and other long-term goals. The examples shared below are notable exceptions to defining and measuring girls’ agency and understanding its relationship with reproductive health outcomes.

A working definition of adolescent girls’ agency from AMPLIFY Girls

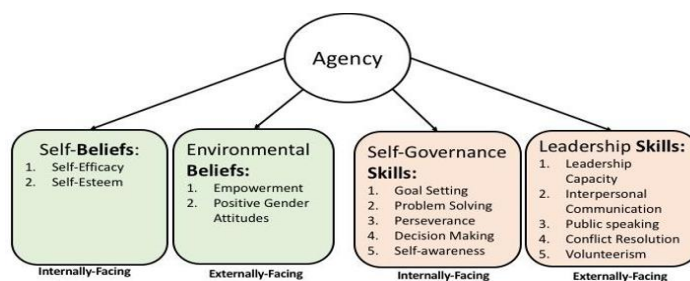
A girl’s ability to affect change in her own life or community.

### Collectively Defining Agency with Community-Driven Organizations

In 2018, the AMPLIFY Girls Network—which works with community-driven organizations representing health, education, economic empowerment, and other sectors to improve the lives of adolescent girls—led a process to define **what success looks like for girls in their communities**. Consensus emerged among network members that success for girls is characterized by the ability to affect change in their own lives and world, otherwise known as agency.

AMPLIFY Girls partners in East Africa used a participatory approach to construct a quantitative measure of agency that is defined by, and for, the organizations it will serve. Through surveys and focus group discussions, AMPLIFY Girls members identified a **list of 10 skills and 4 beliefs** (Sidle & Oulo, 2023) that they felt were **most important for girls’ agency** in their communities and that were explicitly taught by their programs. The emerging measures of agency—**self-beliefs (internally facing)**, **environmental beliefs (externally-facing)**, **self-governance skills (internally-facing)**, and **leadership skills (externally-facing)**—are shown in Figure 1. These measures are currently being tested in five countries in East and South Africa for the extent to which they accurately measure what they intend to measure.

Figure 1: Beliefs and Skills Relevant to Agency

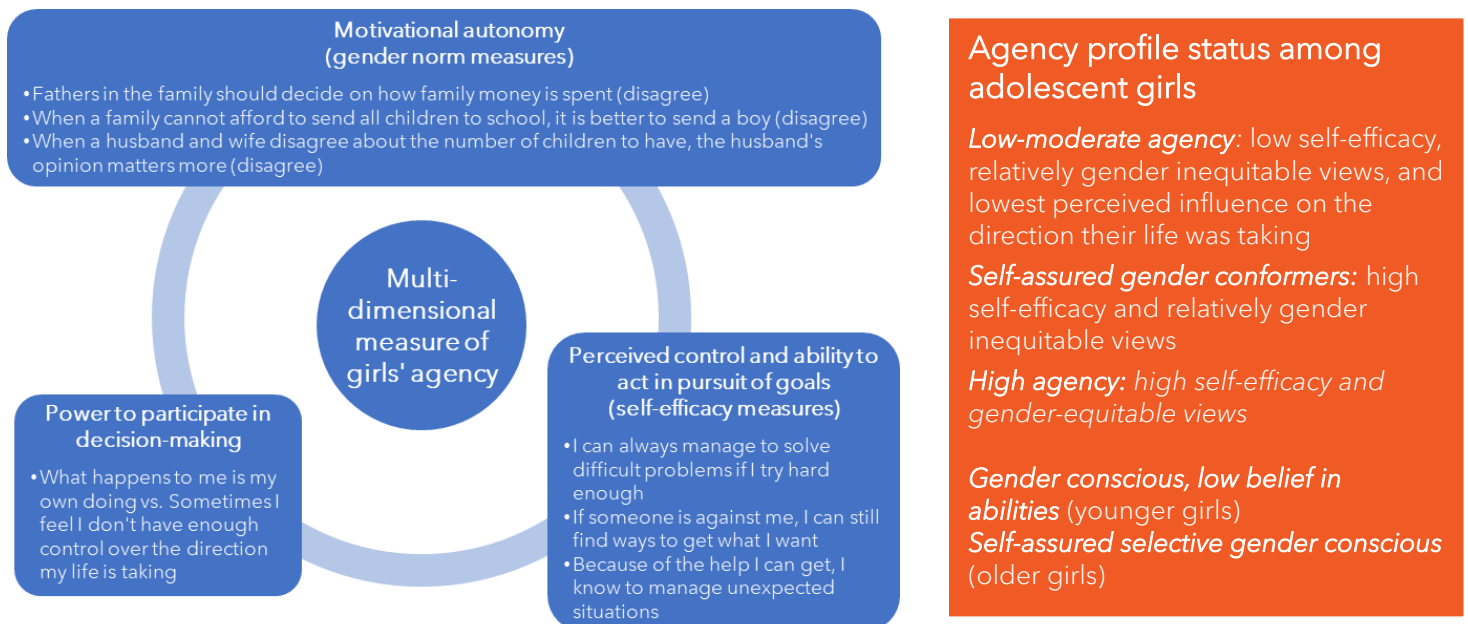


### Multi-Dimensional Measure of Agency & Its Relationship to Reproductive Health Outcomes

A study by McCarthy et. al. (2022) of the Adolescent Girls’ Empowerment Program (AGEP) in rural and urban Zambia –an asset-building program for adolescent girls aged 10-19 that assessed how access to social,

<sup>1</sup> Because the evidence on girls’ agency is still evolving, defining it means considering related terms like girls’ empowerment—which Temin et. al. (2018) define as voice, choice, and control—or looking to related frameworks on women’s agency, such as the one by Donald et. al. (2017) that contains three dimensions of agency: goal setting, perceived control and ability (“sense of agency”), and acting on goals.

health and economic assets would reduce vulnerabilities that lead to unwanted/mistimed pregnancy, as well as other negative life experiences –is another notable exception to the challenges of measuring agency, defining girls' agency status, and relating agency status to reproductive health outcomes, as shown below.



### Agency profile findings and relationship to RH outcomes\*

- Agency status is dynamic throughout adolescence
  - Younger girls likely to transition to the highest agency status over time
  - High agency membership declined among older girls
- Early life resources were associated with augmented agency while exposure to negative events, particularly early marriage, was associated with detractor from high agency status.
- Girls who expressed high self-efficacy but gender-conforming values were most at risk of early marriage and unwanted/mistimed pregnancy while *high agency* girls were at comparatively low risk.

\*Unwanted/mistimed pregnancy and birth

### Maximizing the Impact of Programs on Girls' Agency

Effective programs to improve girls' agency are likely to be holistic in nature, addressing multiple dimensions of their well-being, and operating in different social settings such as schools, communities, and families. A recent study (Sidle et. al., 2022) from AMPLIFY Girls using their agency measure produced some important programmatic recommendations to maximize the impact on girls' agency:

- Target the most vulnerable, or those who are likely to have the lowest agency
- Engage in regular, sustained, and medium-touch program delivery with focused content
- Consider program durations longer than three months. (The analysis indicated that every additional month of programming after three months yielded increases in agency gains)
- Conduct more research that evaluates the effect of programs on girls' beliefs about gender and gender norms, as this appears to be the slowest changing dimension of agency.

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This data brief was created by the Population Council's GIRL Center in collaboration with AMPLIFY Girls to inform the thematic roundtable discussion on Agency at the Girls Deliver Pre-Conference on Adolescent Girls held in Kigali, Rwanda ahead of the Women Deliver 2023 Conference.

Suggested citation:

Engbretsen, Sarah. 2023. "Agency," Girls Deliver Pre-Conference on Adolescent Girls Data Brief. New York: Population Council.