

Shifting gender social norms amidst expanded expression of empowerment and agency: Out-of-school girls in Sierra Leone's EAGER project

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Accepted 8 April, 2025

ABSTRACT

The Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient (EAGER) project addresses the vital issue of empowering marginalized out-of-school adolescent girls in Sierra Leone through an informal education initiative. Our study, conducted by Sierra Leonean researchers using a feminist lens, explores the perspectives of both girls and caregivers on empowerment and social norms. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions over a three-week period, we explore how social norms shape the girls' agency and how they navigate them to create positive change. These sessions included 20 EAGER participants, 10 caregivers, 5 mentors, 2 facilitators, and one husband of an EAGER participant across three selected districts (Western Area Urban, Kambia, and Kono). The findings reveal that, while the girls operated within existing social structures, they gained confidence, assertiveness, and enhanced communication skills through the EAGER program, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to their communities and gradually shift social constraints. We believe this research offers important insights into sustainable gender empowerment through education and contributes to broader discussions about fostering agency through education within restrictive societal frameworks.

Keywords: Gender norms, Sierra Leone, empowerment, youth education, girls' education.

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INTRODUCTION

The Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient (EAGER) project was an inspiring initiative dedicated to the education and empowerment of girls, providing transformative learning opportunities to 27,322 out-of-school adolescent girls in Sierra Leone's 10 districts. EAGER was carefully tailored to meet the specific educational and psychosocial needs of girls aged 13 to 19, who had previously missed out on formal schooling due to life circumstances, gender inequalities, and social norms. These barriers, including demanding household responsibilities and stigma linked to factors such as early marriage and teenage pregnancy, were recognized as

critical factors hindering their access to learning. To overcome these barriers and nurture their psychosocial well-being, resilience, and empowerment, EAGER adopted a comprehensive approach to learning that is described further below.

The EAGER project's approach incorporates a deep understanding of how gender intertwines with complex social relations. Considering gender equality and empowerment without acknowledging relational engagement and meaning-making would neglect the primary factors shaping girls' experiences (Robeyns, 2008). While the EAGER Endline Evaluation found

positive results of the intervention on girls' expanding sense of agency in their lives, as well as relationships with their husbands/partners, families, and community (Sarr et al., 2022), limitations were realized in understanding language and meaning-making around the girls' own description and interpretation of changing social norms. Therefore, this current study was carried out by Sierra Leonean researchers using a feminist approach to further understand language and meaning from the perspective of the girls and caregivers. It uses data from in-depth interviews with seven Mentors and Facilitators, focus group discussions with 20 girls, and focus group discussions with 11 caregivers and partners to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the ways in which social norms influence these out-of-school girls in exercising agency in their lives, homes, and communities?
2. How are they strategically using their power to navigate their unique circumstances and influence changes that benefit them?

In this paper, a feminist adaptation of Sen's capability framework (2004), as proposed by Unterhalter (2007), is used to explore how social norms influence the perceptions and discussions of "empowerment" among these out-of-school girls who participated in the EAGER project. The analysis delves into the ways in which they exercise agency in their lives, homes, and communities, revealing the nuanced interplay between their aspirations and the shaping forces of social norms. This research will inform and complement further studies on the intersection of social norms, power, visibility, and girls' capabilities in achieving their desired outcomes. This study supports the project's deeper understanding of any underlying shifts in social norms from a gender and feminist perspective to inform the development of future programming for adolescent girls. Therefore, this study can inform the development of future strategies for girls' education and empowerment programming, which other local and international organizations working across Sierra Leone and similar contexts could use to tailor their program and maximize positive impact in the lives of adolescent girls. Further, this research not only contributes to the discourse in the fields of education and gender, but also enriches the broader conversation in international educational development by exploring the pivotal role of social norms and culturally constructed gender roles in influencing the reach and success of a program. Finally, this research was conducted by a Sierra Leonean team with a deep understanding of the language and culture(s). It was established after the project Endline Evaluation that not enough was understood about the nuances of language and meaning within this context, and this team was especially interested in better understanding the girls' and caregivers' use of various terms like 'respect' and

'obedience' when talking about the changes in the girls as a result of their participation in the program. Thus, this research also provides a local lens to feminist and gender issues in under-resourced areas and among marginalized populations.

This paper begins with a more extensive description of the EAGER project followed by a presentation of literature related to education, gender, and social norms in low-resource settings. To frame the work, Unterhalter's feminist adaptation of Sen's capability framework serves as the foundation for subsequent discussions on methods, findings, and conclusions.

The EAGER project

EAGER was a four-year education and empowerment project designed for out-of-school adolescent girls ages 13-19 who missed out on formal learning opportunities. Through a consortium of four partners – the International Rescue Committee, Concern Worldwide, Restless Development, and BBC Media Action—operating in 10 districts of Sierra Leone, EAGER staff and community-based volunteers worked together to deliver functional literacy, numeracy, financial literacy, and life skills sessions for girls. Girls attended this Learning Program for 30 weeks in female-only Safe Spaces and Learning Centers set up and maintained by the project.

All sessions were delivered by volunteer mentors and facilitators who were recruited from the girls' communities and trained to lead sessions and provide ongoing support to the girls. Female Mentors were the first line of contact and support for the girls and were responsible for building a relationship of trust with them as they led the Life Skills sessions. Facilitators led functional Literacy, Numeracy, and Financial Literacy sessions for the girls. They were expected to encourage a growth mindset in the girls and shift the disempowering narrative that out-of-school adolescent girls are not capable of learning. Both mentors and facilitators were coached and encouraged to be allies and advocates for girls in the community.

By the end of the Learning Program, every girl completed an Empowerment Plan in which she set her own learning, household, community, and financial goals. After graduating from EAGER, this plan was intended to guide her through a transition phase, where she would use the different skills she had learned to work toward her goals. EAGER graduates received a conditional cash grant to pursue their financial goals and practice the skills they had learned in their Financial Literacy sessions.

To strengthen the support systems around the girls, EAGER teams led structured Community Dialogues with the girls' caregivers and with influential community members. Participants were encouraged to wrap up each dialogue by identifying concrete actions they could take to address the problems girls were facing in the community,

and these plans were documented for accountability. To build support for girls across the wider population, EAGER produced weekly girl-centered radio programs and broadcasted them on national and local radio stations.

Through two successive cohorts of girls, EAGER worked directly with 27,322 out-of-school adolescent girls across Sierra Leone. The EAGER project was funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) through the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) initiative Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) funding window and implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Concern Worldwide, Restless Development, and BBC Media Action. The project set out to reach some of the most marginalized adolescent girls in Sierra Leone, and this meant working in remote areas where literacy levels are generally lower.

The EAGER Baseline Evaluation confirmed that 45% of the girls enrolled had never attended school, and 45% had dropped out early without learning functional reading and writing. Many were already married (44%) and/or already had the responsibility of caring for their own children (58%) (Sarr et al., 2020). Heavy chore burdens were noted to isolate girls from their peers, and access to information, resources, services, and opportunities was limited by literacy and financial constraints as well as gender norms that limit girls' self-determination in their homes and communities.

The project was designed to address these multiple barriers to participation and learning and to create accessible opportunities and supportive spaces for girls to build practical and empowering skills. These skills were tailored to the girls' context and daily lives so they could be practiced and used to create positive changes for themselves, their families, and their communities. Following a socio-ecological model, the project aimed to empower out-of-school adolescent girls on a personal level while strengthening the support systems around them through increased awareness and opportunities for collective action.

The project's external evaluations highlighted positive changes in life skills and shifts in social norms. However, they also raised concerns regarding the language used by girls and their families to describe these changes, particularly frequent references to terms like 'respect' and 'obedience.' While the project team interpreted these as indicators of increased agency within the girls' cultural context, the culturally embedded meanings of such terms warranted further exploration. Local feminist researchers, well-positioned to interpret these nuances, were essential in deepening the understanding of how empowerment was being framed and articulated within the community. This study seeks to further understand the various ways that social norms influenced how these girls exercised the agency that they built through the EAGER program, and how they used their increased sense of power to instigate positive changes for themselves and/or their communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social norms play a critical role in shaping the agency of girls and women worldwide. These norms, deeply embedded in various aspects of life such as education, family dynamics, cultural practices, economic participation, and safety, often dictate the opportunities available to women and girls and influence their overall well-being. The literature consistently underscores the significance of these norms in either advancing or hindering gender equality, with particular emphasis on how they intersect with education, employment, and family roles.

Social norms and agency

Social norms are pivotal in defining gender roles and expectations, which in turn shape the agency of women and girls. The UKAid Drivers of Change for Gender Norms framework identifies three key influencing factors that contribute to the formation and evolution of gender norms: individual factors, transmission mechanisms, and broad drivers. These factors collectively create a complex landscape that can either perpetuate or challenge existing norms, ultimately affecting gender equality and the well-being of girls and women (Marcus et al., 2015). (Figure 1)

Individual factors include socio-economic circumstances, individual agency, and the influence of families and communities. The literature highlights how socio-economic conditions, such as poverty and lack of education, can limit the agency of women and girls, restricting their opportunities for economic independence and social participation. Transmission mechanisms, such as media, information and communication technology (ICT), and the influence of religious and political leaders, play a crucial role in either reinforcing or challenging harmful gender norms. Broad drivers, including economic changes, political mobilization, and demographic shifts, can have profound impacts on gender norms, either promoting gender equality or entrenching traditional roles.

Education and social norms

A significant body of research emphasizes the strong correlation between educational attainment and the empowerment of women and girls. Educational attainment is a key predictor of women's agency, with studies showing that more educated women are more likely to be employed, participate in community activities, and advocate for gender equality (Moghadam, 2004). However, gender disparities in educational access and outcomes persist globally, often driven by entrenched social norms.

In many parts of the world, girls face significant barriers

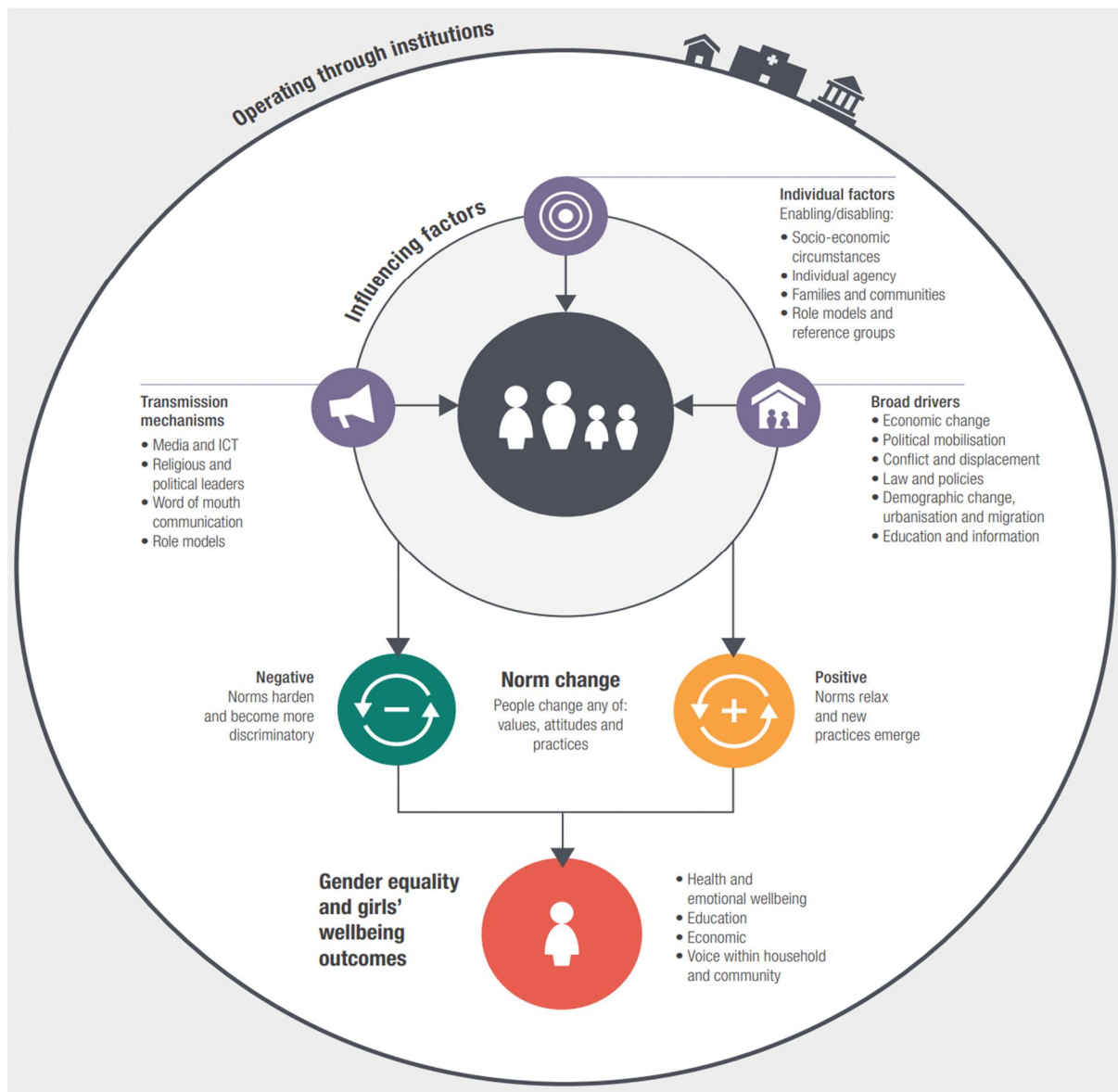


Figure 1. Drivers of change for gender norms (Marcus et al., 2015).

to education, which are often reinforced by gender norms that prioritize domestic roles over academic achievement. The literature indicates that girls are twice as likely as boys to be excluded from education, employment, or training, leading to greater economic disadvantage and dependence. Additionally, high rates of early marriage and pregnancy, particularly among vulnerable populations, further limit girls' educational and economic opportunities (*International Labour Organization and United Nations Children's Fund GirlForce: Skills, Education and Training for Girls No, 2018*).

In Sierra Leone, for example, educational data reflect significant disparities in literacy, numeracy, and life skills

among girls, with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those with disabilities facing the greatest challenges. These effects are multi-generational with the likelihood of a girl going to school reduced if her mother has not attended. Out-of-school girls, in particular, exhibit the largest deficits in educational outcomes, underscoring the importance of promoting education for all girls, especially the most vulnerable. Even mothers of girls spoke about how they were learning life skills such as hygiene and negotiation from their own daughters (IRC, 2020). The UKAid framework supports the assertion that educational programs, when coupled with shifts in socio-economic circumstances and community perspectives,

can be powerful tools for challenging and changing harmful gender norms (Marcus et al., 2015).

Family expectations and gender norms

Family structure and expectations are central to the perpetuation of gender norms, particularly in relation to childcare, eldercare, and financial dependence. In many cultures, particularly in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, women are expected to prioritize marriage, motherhood, and caregiving responsibilities over personal and professional development. The literature finds that urbanization and increased female education and employment can lead to changes in family structure and gender roles, delaying marriage and reducing fertility rates (Moghadam, 2004).

These changes are not uniform across all societies. In many developing countries, the wage gap between men and women remains significant, forcing women into economically dependent roles within the household. This economic dependence often comes with expectations of domestic labor and caregiving, further limiting women's opportunities for education and employment. Even when women receive financial support, such as grants for small businesses, the intrahousehold dynamics can prevent them from fully benefiting from these resources, as male family members often control the finances (Friedson-Ridenour and Pierotti, 2019). In the case of EAGER, many of the husbands did not know the cost of domestic goods which prevented them from giving sufficient money to their wives for taking care of the children and the household. The program provided the girls with lockboxes to allow the girls to safely store their cash.

Safety concerns and gender norms

Safety concerns, both real and perceived, also play a significant role in shaping the agency of women and girls. The literature indicates that fears of physical safety and sexual harassment can deter women from participating in the workforce or pursuing educational opportunities. For example, data from the India Human Development Survey shows that higher perceived levels of crime against women are associated with lower female labor force participation (Jayachandran, 2020). Women often restrict their interactions with men and avoid certain jobs or educational institutions due to safety concerns, which can have long-term economic consequences.

In India, studies have found that female students are more likely to choose lower-quality colleges within the Delhi University system for safety reasons, whereas male students do not prioritize safety in their decision-making (Jayachandran, 2020). This preference for safety over quality education leads to lower expected post-college

earnings for women, perpetuating economic disparities and reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Changing social norms

The literature suggests that changing harmful social norms requires a multifaceted approach, involving education, economic incentives, and community engagement. Community discussions have been identified as an effective tool for challenging and renegotiating harmful norms, as they allow members of the same group to identify and address practices that limit their well-being and empowerment (Cislaghi et al., 2019). Educational interventions, particularly those that promote gender equality and respect for women's rights, are also crucial in shifting norms and empowering women (Moghadam, 2004).

The UKAid framework further emphasizes the importance of role models, supportive families, and community leaders in promoting new norms and accelerating their adoption (*International Labour Organization and United Nations Children's Fund GirlForce: Skills, Education and Training for Girls No, 2018*). Economic incentives, such as grants, can also play a role in shifting gender norms, provided they are designed to encourage behaviors that promote gender equality. However, the literature highlights the need for more research on the role of health and emotional well-being in supporting norm change, particularly in developing communities.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Unterhalter (2007) suggests that gender signals attributes that are free to change within the constraints of social relations. She argues that girls from different times and places and one girl/woman within a single life will act out gender differently depending on social structures, negotiations, and contestations. Gender is entangled in a complex network of social relations and thus considering gender equality or empowerment without considering relational engagement and meaning-making removes the primary constraining and shaping factor (Robeyns, 2008).

Amidst this complex web of existing social relations within these tight-knit Sierra Leonean communities, the EAGER project sought to provide resources, eliminate stigma, and shift power toward these out-of-school girls in ways that increased their agency to achieve what is important to them (Ball, 2012; Foucault, 1980). Sen's capability approach focuses on a person's capability to achieve what they value. Sen (2004) argues for recognition of the space between resources and achievements as well as the freedom people have to first pursue the kind of life that they value and then translate

resources into achievements that they value. The EAGER project strove to facilitate this process by lessening the gap between resources (including personal, social, knowledge, and material assets) and desired achievements. Drawing on the feminist understanding of power, the project design aimed to nurture girls' sense of power within themselves, encourage them to practice using their power to act, and strengthen their social networks for increased collective power that could lead to social change.

Unterhalter (2007) has captured this important addition to Sen's capability approach by contending that it must consider the extent to which an individual's determination of what they value is merely a reflection of social constraints. For example, in the EAGER project, a girl might not choose to take part in a particular community meeting because it is viewed as a space for men. The capability approach emphasizes the importance of expanding the capabilities of individuals to achieve what they value by engaging in public discussion and debate so that the nature of these capabilities is openly understood. Unterhalter counters that an individual could have access to the same effective capability or freedom to pursue a goal – such as education – but could face a social constraint that limits their capability for education. For example, girls and boys could legally and formally have the right to pursue education, but girls could be told that school is not necessary for them because they will be married at a young age or because it is seen as a strain on household resources. In this case, the girl's capability or freedom to pursue education is effectively reduced by social constraints. In other words, she says, “[i]t is not only about equality of condition in education but also about equality of conditions and capabilities that bear on education” (p. 100). Freedoms available should not be the only consideration but also the factors that shape the way people make choices amidst these freedoms. This paper uses Unterhalter's feminist adaptation of Sen's capability framework to shape the exploration and discussion of how social norms influence the perceptions and discussions of “empowerment” among these out-of-school girls who participated in the EAGER project.

METHODS

This study used qualitative methods including in-depth interviews and focus groups with EAGER participants, caregivers, mentors, facilitators, and one husband of an EAGER participant.¹ This allowed for a multi-angle perspective of (a) the ways in which social norms influence these out-of-school girls in exercising agency in their lives,

homes, and communities and (b) how they are strategically using their power to navigate their unique circumstances and influence changes that benefit them. By using a qualitative approach, participants were able to define and discuss topics in their own words, which was particularly important for capturing their perceived experience with social norms, their own meanings given to “empowerment” and “agency,” and their varied experiences with the ways in which they feel power shifting and how they have been able to use it or not.²

Out of the ten Districts of implementation, three districts (Western Area Urban, Kambia, and Kono) were chosen, with one community per district, to capture the varied experiences of girls in the program. The communities were selected from those previously involved in the external evaluations within these districts, prioritizing ease of access for the researcher and language compatibility, given the limited timeframe available for the study. Direct supervisors³ were also consulted to recommend communities with the most active mentors and facilitators, or those where these individuals could be more readily reached. This was especially important considering the project had concluded, and there was significant mobility at the local level from both volunteers and EAGER participants (adolescent girls). The Western Area Urban served as an example of an urban environment near the capital; Kambia provided perspectives from a conservative Muslim and rural region; and Kono was found in the project Endline Report to have strong societal barriers to girls' mobility. Mentors and facilitators participated in in-depth interviews while EAGER participants and caregivers participated in focus group discussions. These interviews and focus group discussions were semi-structured with open-ended questions to allow for qualitative responses to show the specific relationships with the girls and trends respondents saw in their regions. This methodology was chosen for the EAGER participants as project research experience found them more at ease with discussing complex issues in a group of trusted peers. Mentors and facilitators provided valuable insights, drawing on their specific roles and close involvement with the girls from the outset of the project. Their sustained engagement allowed them to offer a deeper understanding of the girls' experiences and the project's influence. The following table indicates the specific research activities conducted across each community which included a total of five focus group discussions and six interviews. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in local languages and transcribed in English. Certain nuances with expressions

1 With the husband of one EAGER participant, an ad hoc interview was conducted as he was enthusiastic to speak to the researchers to discuss the way EAGER had shaped his relationship with his wife.

2 The study was reviewed and approved by the IRB at the International Rescue Committee (Protocol Number: EDU 1.00.029).

3 Supervisors were paid EAGER staff from the four partner organizations who both trained and supported EAGER volunteers (mentors and facilitators) throughout the project.

used connote differently for English, and these are described further in the findings as needed. To analyze the data, Clarke and Braun's (2017) approach was used allowing for a flexible emerging of themes based on the

participants' perspectives. Data analysis was performed manually as many of the spoken languages are not written languages, so a translation had to be provided that takes into account the language and cultural context.

Table 1. Summary of research activities.

Location	Method	Sampled group
Western Area Urban	Focus group discussions	6 EAGER participants 4 Caregivers
	Interview	2 Mentors
	Focus group discussion	10 EAGER participants
Kambia	Interviews	1 Mentor
		1 Facilitator
		1 Husband of an EAGER participant
Kono	Focus group discussions	4 EAGER participants 6 Caregivers
	Interviews	2 Mentors
		1 Facilitator

The socio-demographic profiles of the respondents are as follows:

- *EAGER Participants*: Girls aged 14-19 who were previously excluded from their community due to underage marriage, child pregnancy, or disability. They have been systematically excluded from the community, but throughout the project they were educated in life skills, financial literacy, and basic writing.
- *Caregivers*: Parents/guardians of these girls, often who have ostracized their child from their home, or participated in discrimination due to community pressures.
- *Mentors*: Females within the community who were identified based on their acceptance/ role within the community and a basic level of education, meaning they could serve as a teacher and a role model for the girls in the community.
- *Facilitators*: Identified as a suitable individual (male or female) in the community to teach the financial literacy course. Again, they are similarly seen as a well-respected individual in the community.

FINDINGS

These findings as presented by the local researchers in collaboration with the IRC team highlight how social norms have shaped girls' views and their ability to exercise

agency across various aspects of their lives. They reveal how these girls strategically navigate these norms and the challenges they face to achieve their personal goals and effect changes that matter to them. The researchers have identified three themes that are detailed further in this section: (1) meaning of empowerment; (2) accessing power through personal agency, social relationships, and community support; and (3) navigating social norms.

Theme 1: Meaning of empowerment

The interpretation of "empowerment" varies among girls. For instance, a girl in Mayenkinah saw empowerment as making friends and becoming less of an introvert. In Tawuya, Kambia District, one girl viewed empowerment as spacing out having children, while another saw it as performing household chores independently and selling t-shirts with her mother's support. For others, it meant choosing to return to school without family pressure. A caregiver in Kainkondor noted her daughter's independent decision to go back to school.

Empowerment for these girls encompasses more than personal growth; it involves contributing to their homes (through chores and economic activities), mentoring others, expanding their social networks, returning to school, and demonstrating confidence and maturity. This broader view of empowerment extends beyond individual

transformation to collective support and engagement in community issues.

“Empowerment is to add value to yourself, do more than before, make yourself important to be part of the community.” (Girls FGD, Kono)

“Empowerment is what we did not know before, to have been trained on it now, so EAGER has empowered us. Girls should be able to stand up for themselves.” (Girls FGD, Kambia)

For the girls, empowerment was being able to do the things they would normally not have done, and it was uniquely specific for each one. Prior to engaging in this discussion, it is important to highlight that empowerment and what the girls choose to value is constrained by their social setting (Unterhalter, 2007). A theoretical discussion to consider for the design of future programs includes the following questions: (a) should the success of a program be measured as how much the program was able to get participants to place value on aspects that reach beyond the local community values? or (b) should the success of the program be evaluated based on how well it leads participants to achieve what they personally value even within existing social constraints that shape these values? In the case of EAGER, a middle approach to gently shifting social norms through community engagement while also encouraging girls to assess their values enabled the girls to choose values that stretched into this shifting social reality.

Although some points of empowerment might appear disempowering from a Global North perspective, the program's strategy and the gradual nature of changing social constraints are crucial. Moving towards full gender equality requires time, persistence, women and girls' leadership, and collective action from within the society. Encouraging girls to value achievements not feasible within their current social constraints would undermine the goal of increasing their agency and power.

Theme 2: Accessing power through personal agency, social relationships, and community support

In discussing their increased power to navigate their circumstances, interviews and focus groups indicated the girls had expanded their sense of personal agency. This recognition of their own power within related to increased confidence and higher self-esteem, self-worth and dignity. As they tapped into this power within, they were more understanding, became better listeners and could better engage in their roles as wives which they understood as being supportive of their husbands and to plan and hold constructive discussions.

In shifting the social constraints, the EAGER program

worked with caregivers and community members to better understand how to effectively engage with the girls in respectful ways. Caregivers and community members noted having more “control” and having improved communication with the girls. Overall, caregivers have changed to become more empathetic with the girls allowing them to feel more in control in their roles as parents and more confident in the way they interact with their daughters.

With an increased ability to effectively communicate and access their power, girls can now navigate the world around them utilizing less confrontational skills to present their needs. In Tawuya, Gbinleh Chiefdom in Kambia District, one of the husbands accompanied his wife and patiently stood by until the session had concluded. He gave her and two others a ride home on his bike. The researchers engaged him in an ad-hoc interview, and he stated he observed a significant behavioral change in his wife. According to him, she was more engaging, and understanding and they communicated with more empathy towards each other. His explanation of the change and the improved relationship highlighted how she had become a more supportive and reliable partner, they now plan and discuss issues in a less confrontational manner, and she is now valued and respected in her home. He did not experience the same behavior change and improvements in interpersonal relations with his second wife, who was not enrolled in the EAGER project.

In this cultural context, the use of terms like ‘respecting me’ or ‘obedient’ does not imply submission, but rather the girls’ ability to remain calm and clear as they engage with others. In other words, the girls have learned how to communicate their needs more openly and with greater emotional regulation. Ultimately, this allows them to navigate their goals and roles more strategically through more constructive communication and engagement. For issues they would have formerly disagreed over with caregivers and partners, they now adopted a less confrontational method and employed a more solution-oriented mindset.

“EAGER has helped them to deal with their parents...We as caregivers know how to communicate better with the girls.” (Caregivers FGD, Kono).

Feedback from caregivers and husbands is that girls are challenging what caregivers and husbands are saying, but they do it more strategically. The girls are better informed, so they are communicating what they need and want more skillfully. In the past, because they could not express themselves well, they were having trouble communicating or not communicating at all (e.g. ‘*I did not even know my girl had started her menses*,’ because instead of having a conversation, they were just shouting). However, now that the girls understand how to communicate and manage

their emotions, they are better able to initiate and respond to conversations, creating less misunderstanding. Before, they would shout at each other, but now they are able to speak better (e.g. *'Now I do my chores without my mom shouting at me'*). Caregivers and husbands are accompanying the girls in becoming better listeners and better in understanding, improving the communication process for all parties.

A caregiver in Freetown shared how her daughter would explain to the rest of the family what she was learning in her EAGER sessions, clearly using this as an opportunity to influence change within her family and ensure their support for the changes she was experiencing. The mother also noted her daughter's increased ability to express what she needs to take care of herself, which was a common theme shared by the respondents. She concluded:

"I saw great changes. What she wasn't doing before, I have started to see the difference. She asked to use pads during her menstruation, before she used cloth. I was very happy. The project has changed their lives." (Caregivers FGD, Western Area Urban)

Importantly, it can also be concluded that the girls have been able to navigate their circumstances as a result of community ownership. The project had the support of the chiefs, councilors and other stakeholders. Through their sessions and the ongoing support of their mentors, the girls have been encouraged to make positive changes for their benefit and the long-term benefit of their community.

"We tell the girls that if a single girl is educated, we know the entire nation will be helped." (Mentors KII, Kono).

The interviews suggest that good communication between the girls and their caregivers created better understanding of each other's position. This also benefitted from the mentors' positive communications with caregivers throughout the project about supporting their girls. The girls have also been able to apply their assertiveness and improved communication skills in a community setting, allowing for their full participation and contribution to the improvement of community life.

"IRC has added more value to my life. As a woman I was not bold enough to speak in the community meetings, I used to feel sad and sit in the corner. But since the project, my confidence has increased and I am now able to talk to people in the community. IRC has done a lot in my life." (Girls FGD, Kono).

Although 'assertive' can be understood as 'rude/aggressive/rebellious' in Krio because you are talking back, in the curriculum, assertiveness is intended as communicating your position clearly and calmly. Rather than using the word for 'assertive', they are instead

described as 'obedient' which in this case holds the same meaning as 'calm and clear'.

These assertive, calm, and clear communication skills have led to girls taking bolder stances within the community. In Kambia, a girl said, *"it helped me to be bold, and be able to approach people."* She further stated that she could now engage and give advice to other women or girls on various issues such as instances of sexual abuse. In addressing issues of sexual violence she usually provides some form of psychological support to the victim and victim's family. This increased ability to communicate more effectively is positively influencing social relations as girls gain further respect within the community and are increasingly able to support others and navigate their own needs in constructive ways.

Most caregivers interviewed through the EAGER project agreed that the girls could now communicate more constructively. In Kainkondor in Kono, one of the girls is now a presenter in the community radio station following her engagement with the EAGER project. She had dropped out of school due to early pregnancy and felt despondent, but her transformation following the EAGER project has earned her great respect in her community. Allowing girls to come to EAGER with children helped to shift the social norm that should you fall pregnant, there was no return to education. This was a clear illustration that though she had dropped out of school, she enrolled and completed the West African School Certificate (A-Levels), and with the life skills acquired through the EAGER project she was now accepted and respected in the community to the extent that she could be the presenter and host of a weekly women's program. The transformation for her was not becoming docile and passive but respectful, responsible and exhibiting values to be emulated by younger girls.

Theme 3: Navigating social norms

With a number of skills at their disposal, the girls developed negotiation skills and are therefore better able to communicate and secure what they want without seeking to undermine the head of the home. That could interrupt current social norms in ways that could impede the girls from achieving their goals. With their high level of self-esteem, the girls were engaging more positively, contributing to decision-making in the home, and contributing financially. This further increases their status and respect within the home and community. Therefore, 'submission' within their context should not be viewed as a form of weakness but as a matter of being respectful to their husbands or elders and as a way for them to gain agility in navigating the current social structures. A respondent in Kono observed:

"In my relationship, EAGER taught me how to

manage my home and that the man will look down on you if you are not contributing to the home. My husband is proud of me when I also put money in the home. I don't molest him even though it sometimes happens." (Girls FGD, Kono).

The word 'molest' here is not used as it is defined in the English dictionary. Within this context, it is used to describe a confrontation or argument between the wife and her husband. A girl in Kambia stated, "...my husband and I now work as partners." Likewise, in Kambia, another girl said,

"...now I respect my husband and he also respects me." Yet another stated, "...prior to the program I could not have a conversation with my husband, and I now negotiate with him so we could work together."

Largely, the feedback from the girls and the mentors presents a positive reception of the transformation of the girls. A husband in Kambia stated, "...I felt positive about it because I was informed she would be going to do some form of learning." This in effect confirms that the husbands/partners of the girls were supportive of their attendance and the subsequent general healthy relationship in the home. Support from partners and males in the community is an important indicator of the success and sustainability of a program. Existing social norms must be considered and at least recognized when making programming decisions in order to widen the space for female participation within that space as a result of a program.⁴

DISCUSSION

Largely, the EAGER project has successfully empowered out-of-school adolescent girls on a personal level while strengthening the support systems around them through increased awareness and opportunities for collective action. Communities have gained valuable residents contributing to the development of their localities. The girls now command increased respect and recognition and have requested the replication of this initiative in other parts of the country. These findings align with the UKAID framework, which emphasizes that educational interventions, when combined with shifts in socioeconomic conditions, can be powerful tools for challenging harmful

social norms (Marcus et al., 2015).

The girls have utilized the skills acquired from the EAGER program to strengthen their relationships with their parents, husbands and other family members. They have been able to further understand the transformation of their bodies as teenagers along with their roles as wife, mother, and daughter. The girls understand the term empowerment to imply not being only self-reliant for themselves but also contributing to the wider community. They acquired skills to become more confident and assertive, leading to an increased sense of self-worth and dignity. Conforming to the social norms of being 'obedient' and 'respectful' is a means through which they can negotiate to secure what they want, which could range from spending time with friends, engaging in economic activities of their choice, and family spacing. This helps to understand a gap in previous research on how individual agency can function within existing social norms, rather than directly opposing them.

While the language of 'obedience' could be seen as conforming to gender roles, the girls view their increased 'obedience' as expressing the fulfillment of practical and functional needs of the girls and the community. From their perspective, their status has improved as they are empowered to collaborate more effectively within their families and communities through the conduit of improved communication. This is critical within the context of Sierra Leone, where hardship is significant, especially in remote and rural communities, and where communal life values are strong. While this might be viewed as a reinforcement of gender roles, it is a step forward in which these young women have increased agency to navigate their circumstances and achieve goals that are important to them – even if that means working within the existing system. It is a slow, long-term, and contextually respectful approach in which the girls gain further awareness and skills and can choose to use them in the ways that they see appropriate for that time and place.

The training packages that were provided – functional numeracy and literacy skills, basic marketing and financial management skills, and life skills that included managing their emotions, understanding personal health and hygiene, and being aware of their homes, community, and the general environment – were viewed by the girls as being empowering, and they described this according to their social and cultural contexts. Being 'obedient' and 'respectful' is about knowing their role as adolescents, and better navigating and more effectively engaging within the current social and community structures. The UKAid framework aligns with these findings in supporting the importance of individual agency and its role in the navigation of and influence on gender norms (Marcus et al., 2015).

The program continued to hold influence; at the time of the research, girls and their mentors were still meeting in their safe spaces in the three locations of the fieldwork.

⁴ As social relations shift, boys are increasingly viewed as needing similar support to shift social norms. Girls and mentors have recommended including boys in empowerment programs, noting that they also need their support to address issues like teenage pregnancy. They noted that boys also need the same level of support as the girls. In Kambia, for example, the boys had invaded the safe space claiming they also similarly needed a safe space to discuss their own issues. Such programs could further empower girls by addressing issues like teenage pregnancy and cohabitation, potentially reducing school dropout rates among girls.

They met to support each other financially and to talk about problems with their businesses or issues at home. The girls interviewed have now also become mentors in their communities, helping to teach other girls about menstrual hygiene and other relevant topics. The time and engagement with the mentors, acceptance by the community elders, and their families, and the safe space where they could discuss their issues brought about a high sense of self-worth and self-esteem. These findings support Cislighi et al. (2019), who argue that community engagement and group discussion are key to making lasting change.

Caregivers in all three areas of the research expressed their appreciation for the impact of the project. What was considered teenage tantrums due to the misunderstanding of parents were now transformed into friendship and understanding. The girls were now supporting their mothers to do the household chores, while also having time to socialize with friends and become economically active. The caregivers (including mothers and aunts) were now more tolerant, understanding of their roles as mothers and women in the home and community, and supportive of their daughters' dreams (captured in their Empowerment Plans). They were even accompanying them on those journeys. As a result, they supported the girls to build their self-esteem and self-worth through these engagements. These outcomes reflect the UKAid framework's emphasis on the role of family support in shifting gender norms, as well as prior research showing that mothers of girls in education programs can learn life skills from their daughters (IRC, 2020).

Although these changes occurred within the existing social constraints and the girls' goals were influenced by their social environment, this project has made an important contribution to expanding girls' capacities to achieve what they value while also working to loosen and shift the social constraints placed on the girls to allow for more room to achieve what they value and to value new types of goals. Changing social constraints is a long-term process, but seeking to address them through the EAGER project has led to a more sustainable outcome and a more impactful project whose effects have the potential to reverberate across generations.

Conclusion

The EAGER project made significant strides in empowering out-of-school adolescent girls in Sierra Leone by equipping them with essential skills and fostering a supportive environment that acknowledges and works within the complex social norms of their communities. The project's comprehensive approach, which included life skills training, mentorship, and the creation of Safe Spaces, not only enhanced the girls' personal agency but also strengthened their relationships with families,

husbands, and community members. This empowerment, while occurring within the framework of existing social norms, enabled the girls to navigate their roles more effectively and assertively, contributing to both their personal development and the well-being of their communities.

The findings of this research underscore the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in gender empowerment initiatives. By understanding and challenging harmful social norms in ways that kept the girls' safety, agency, and well-being at the center, the EAGER project enabled them to define what empowerment meant for themselves and to make choices and take actions that felt empowering within their own lives. The framework of power – with emphasis on power within, power to act, and power to act with others – created space for girls to explore their strengths, expand their confidence as they took their own decisions and acted on them, and build trust and supportive relationships with those around them. This has achieved a sustainable impact, enabling girls to pursue their aspirations while gradually shifting the boundaries of what is possible for them within their societal context. The project's success highlights the value of involving and understanding local perspectives in designing and implementing educational programs.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender and education by demonstrating that empowerment can be achieved even within restrictive social frameworks, provided the approach is respectful, contextually informed, and focused on long-term change. The lessons learned from EAGER have the potential to inform future programming for adolescent girls in Sierra Leone and similar contexts, offering a model for how to empower marginalized populations in a way that is both effective and sustainable. As these young women continue to apply their skills and knowledge, the ripple effects of this project may well extend to future generations, gradually transforming the social landscape of their communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Rachel Park for her contribution to the literature review for this paper and to the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) through the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) initiative Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) for the generous funding of the EAGER project.

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Citation: Salmon-Letelier, M., Edwin, V., Kamara, B., Thompson, L., Filippantonio, G. D., Arp, J., Pearson, I., and Artibello, J. (2025). Shifting gender social norms amidst expanded expression of empowerment and agency: Out-of-school girls in Sierra Leone’s EAGER project. *African Educational Research Journal*, 13(2), 136–147.
