

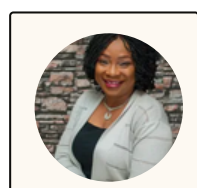
From Surviving to Thriving

From surviving to thriving: Participatory research with and for girls' agency in marginalized communities across Africa and Asia

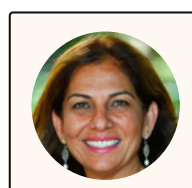
March 28th, 2026

Introduction to LAAGA

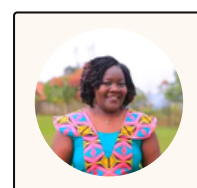
2026 LAAGA Members



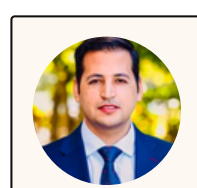
ADEFUNKE EKINE
NIGERIA



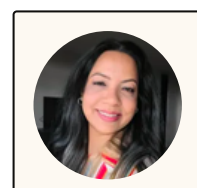
MAYYADA ABU JABER
JORDAN



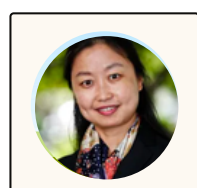
CHRISTINE APIOT
OKUDI
UGANDA



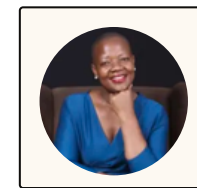
NANGYALAI ATTAL
AFGHANISTAN



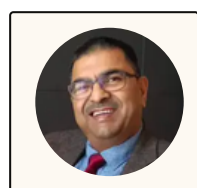
MUSAMMAT
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BANGLADESH



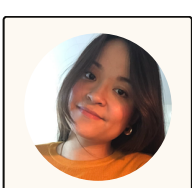
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CHINA



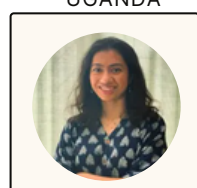
ELLEN CHIGWANDA
ZIMBABWE



GANGA GAUTAM
NEPAL



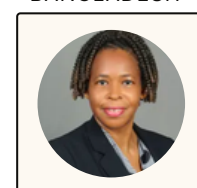
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UNITED STATES



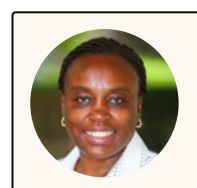
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INDIA



KHADIM HUSSAIN
PAKISTAN



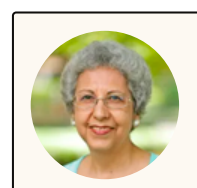
DASMINE KENNEDY
JAMAICA



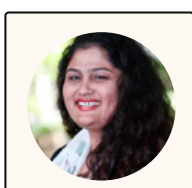
JOYCE KINYANJUI
KENYA



ANYA KASUBHAI
UNITED STATES



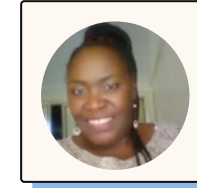
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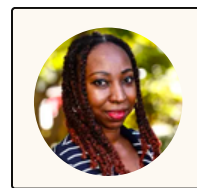
SUMBAL NAVEED
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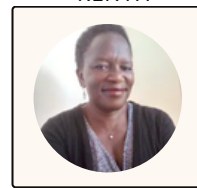
JENNIFER O'DONOGHUE
UNITED STATES



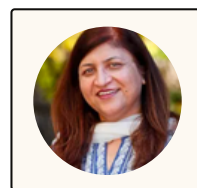
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ZIMBABWE



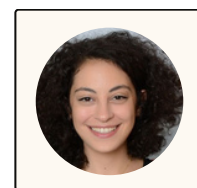
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NIGERIA



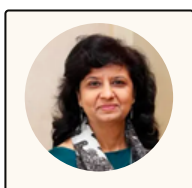
MARY OTIENO
KENYA



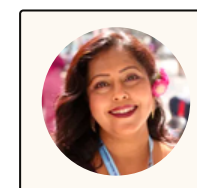
JAMILA RAZZAQ
PAKISTAN



SAMAYA MANSOUR
LEBANON



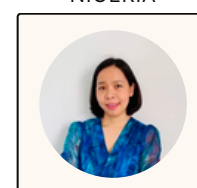
SUMAN SACHDEVA
INDIA



NASRIN SIDDIQA
BANGLADESH



SAMYUKTA
SUBRAMANIAN
INDIA



TRAN TRAN
VIETNAM

WHO?

23 leaders in gender equality in & through education from 15 countries + CUE @ Brookings

WHAT?

A community of practice co-creating knowledge and action with and for girls' agency across diverse contexts

WHEN?

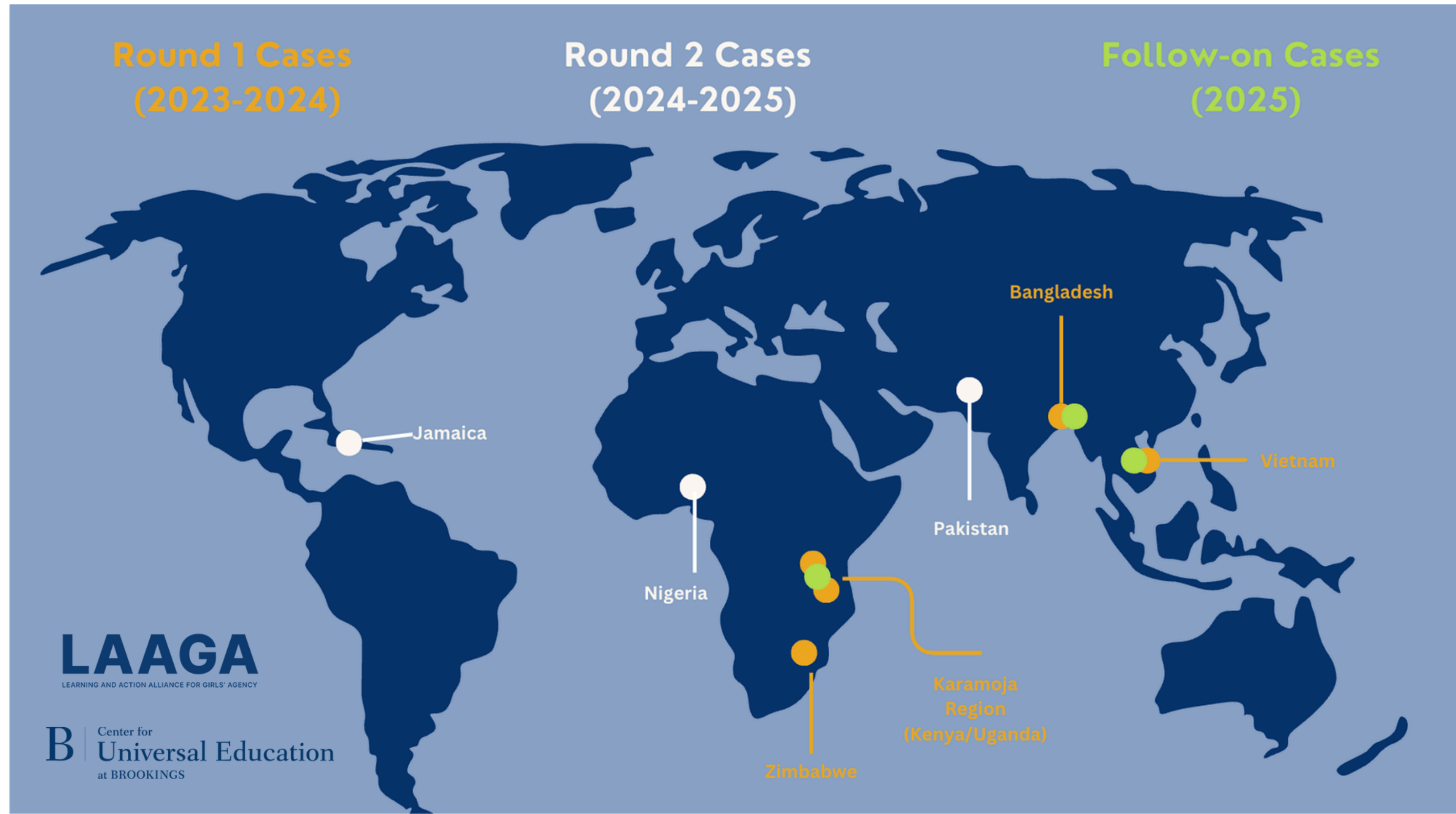
Since May of 2022

WHERE?

Globally with active research in Bangladesh, Jamaica, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Uganda, Vietnam and Zimbabwe

Research Question

What does agency look like for adolescent girls (ages 10-19) in marginalized contexts?



FOUR PRINCIPLES FOR TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS WITH AND FOR GIRLS' AGENCY

Principle 1

Center girls as co-creators of knowledge and drivers of change

Principle 2

Co-construct localized understandings of agency, challenges, and solutions

Principle 3

Strengthen ecosystems to promote girls' agency

Principle 4

Challenge inequitable power dynamics

What does agency mean?

Agency refers to the **power** to identify and voice your **hopes**, make **decisions**, and take **action** to fully shape your own life and the life of your community.

Agency is fundamental to **full and equal participation** and requires negotiating structural and situational barriers to **create opportunities for exercising freedom.**

Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency, 2025

Why does agency matter?

Agency can be a generative force that moves young people not only in reaction to challenging situations but also to constructively create their own possible worlds.
Sulkunen, 2012

Complex intersectional marginalization due to the following

- Climate crisis
- Conflict and displacement, locally and globally
- Safety in school and community
- GBV (Gender Based Violence)
- Cultural barriers: Girls are groomed to accept subjugation and inferiority with apathy, forced and/or early marriages, teenage pregnancies
- Gender roles: Significant responsibilities for household tasks and caregiving
- Education access: infrastructure, distances to school, poverty, low learning outcomes
- Lack of role models
- Political marginalization (historical or current)
- Social exclusion: limited spaces and opportunities for meetings
- Remoteness/isolation: mountainous, arid and semi arid areas, and poor road and social infrastructure

Why adolescent girls in marginalized contexts?

- Young people today face complex challenges but **girls in marginalized contexts** face additional challenges.
- For hundreds of millions of adolescent girls around the world, these challenges present an **increasingly urgent reality**.
- In order for them to overcome these challenges and thrive, they **need to exercise agency** in all aspects of life.
- Girls need agency to help them **navigate intersecting** forms of social, economic, political, and cultural marginalization.



Principle 1

Center girls as co-creators
of knowledge and drivers of
change



Girl Centered Methodologies: Why?

“[...] There is an urgent need for research that strikes a ***balance between recognition of the complex challenges faced by girls and young women in different contexts, and acknowledgment of their voice and agency.*** Specifically, we need critical studies that can help us navigate the ethical challenges of working with girls and young women.”

“For research to enable girls’ participation and create opportunities for their voices to be heard, it must use “girl method”, a feminist methodology that involves ***research for girls, with girls, and about girls.***”

Relebohile Moletsane



GCM: How?

- **Participatory:** Girls engaged across all stages; researchers relinquished control to center diverse lived experiences (Plourde et al., 2020; Monaco, 2020)
- **Collaborative:** Engagement with girls and surrounding social systems
- **Relational:** Agency shaped by family, peers, schools, and communities
- **Multiple qualitative tools:** Participatory methods enabling girls to express their own meanings



GCM: Examples of Participatory Tools

Community Mapping

Focus Group Discussion

Thought Shower

Bridge Model

Story telling



GCM: Who and Where?

- **Participants:** 383 adolescent girls and 500+ community actors (families, educators, authorities, civil society)
- **Locations:** Five countries across Africa and Asia
- **Diversity of contexts:** Varied social, cultural, economic, and systemic marginalization



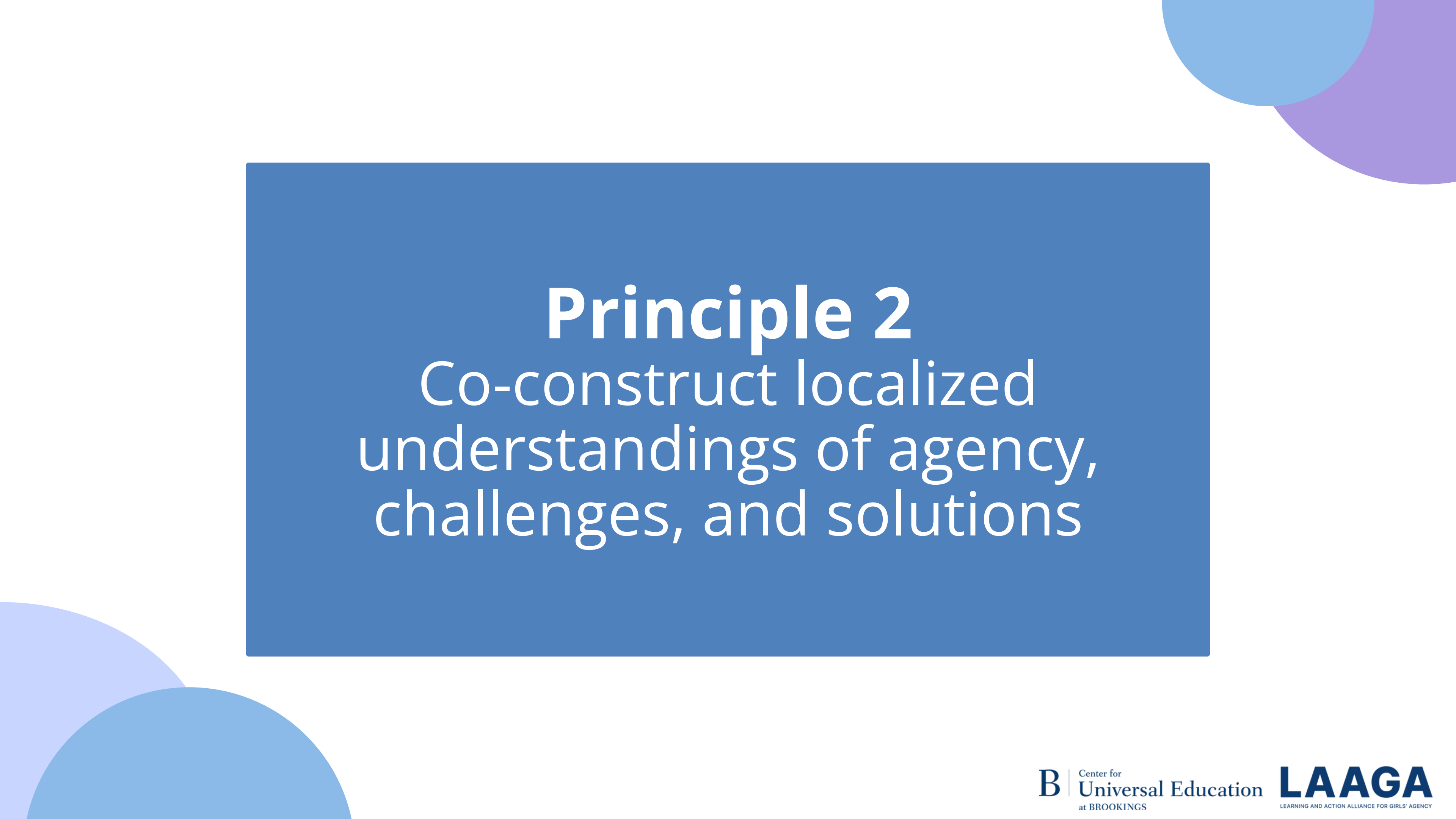
GCM: Ethical Principles

Ethics of care as foundation of the methodology

- Girls recognized with dignity, emotions, vulnerabilities, and strengths
- Girls centered in design and cared in implementation
- Attention to relationships, trust and respect throughout the process

The Mosaic of GCM integrates diverse voices and methods, recognizing that no single approach captures girls' agency, and enabling a more nuanced understanding across contexts.





Principle 2

Co-construct localized understandings of agency, challenges, and solutions

Agency in Girls' Languages

Akemuken (Turkana): A woman who knows and speaks her mind even if this means going against social norms. She sets and achieves goals by remaining focused, working hard and negotiating barriers. She is a brilliant role model, economically independent, and a leader both at home and in the community.

Tính tự chủ (Vietnamese): A girl's autonomy to make choices in life; not just making decisions (tự quyết) but having the power to make choices about her own path, pursue her goals, and shape her future on her own terms.

Kurongeka (Shona): Having the strength and resilience to think independently, take meaningful action, and build relationships with others in ways that help achieve developmental goals both now and in the future.

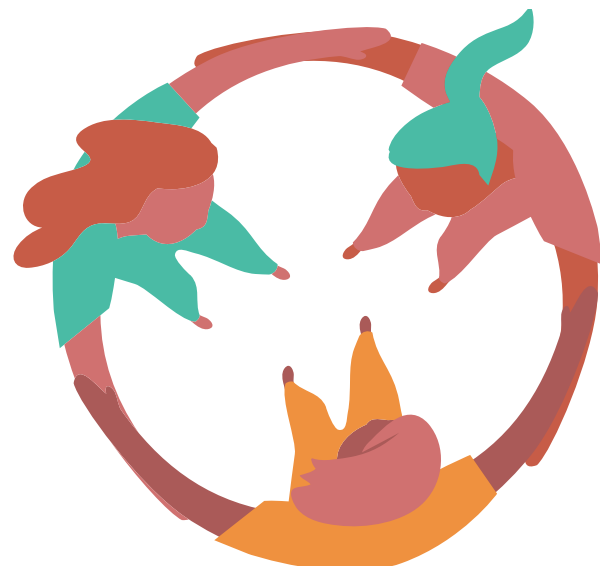
আমার অধিকার (Amar Odhikar, Bangla): The genuine right of a woman to make decisions about her education, marriage, lifestyle, and career and to ensure her dignity in family and society.

Agency as Emerged from LAAGA Research



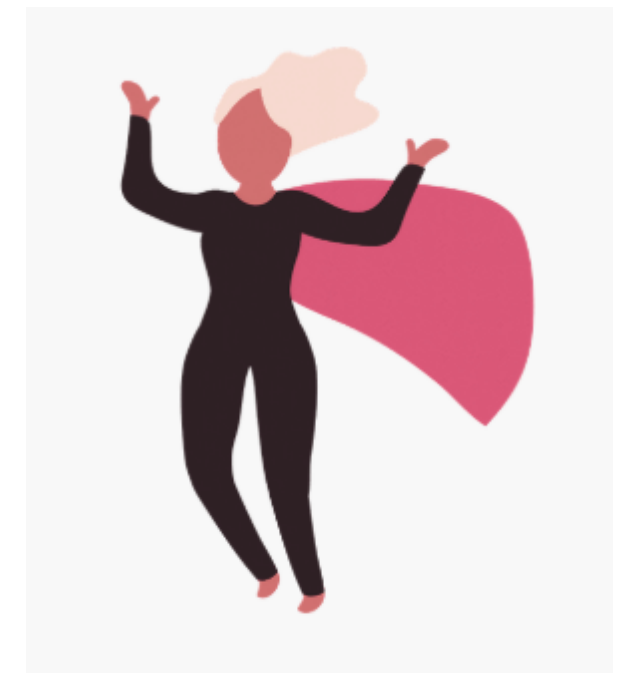
individual
AND
relational

contextual
AND
situational



about skills
AND
systems

mundane
AND
extraordinary.



Individual

- Ability to be free to do what or be who one wants.
- Ability to identify goals and be able to take actions to achieve them against all odds
- The courage to act and express oneself freely
- Autonomy to make choices in life

Relational

- Family space as the most prominent, noting an increasing involvement in family decisions or co-agency
- Educational actors
- Peer [networks](#)
- Dynamism in relationships

Contextual

- Role of mothers versus fathers
- Level of insecurity
- Presence and role of institutions

Iterative relationship between context & situations = opportunity to expand space for agency within contexts.

Situational

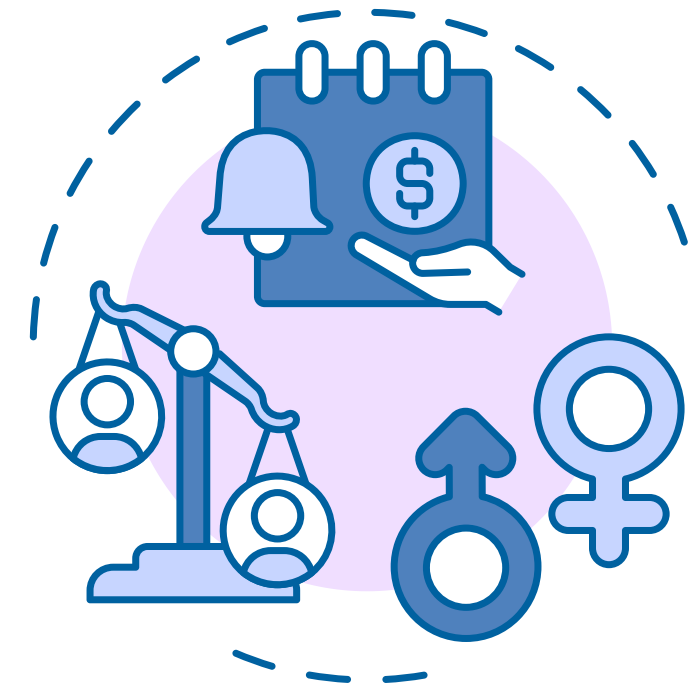
- In private spheres
- In high traffic public spaces where girls are familiar and comfortable
- In formal leadership role
- When they have access to internet
- When they are given the chance
- In unsafe situations that limit their [agency](#).

Skills

- Belief in self: confidence, self-respect, self-efficacy
- Skills to set / achieve goals: persistence, determination, negotiation, hard work, focus
- Leadership and advocacy: courage, assertiveness

System

- Poverty
- Limited access to quality education
- [Gender norms](#)



Mundane

- Daily chores
- Clothing, hairstyles
- Taking care of personal hygiene/self care, respecting bodies



Extraordinary

- Bold mentality
- A fighting spirit
- Speaking out against discrimination
- Starting a side hustle to pay school fees and stay in school

Agency and education

Being in school was both **reflective** and **supportive** of girls' agency.

Schools...spaces where girls can **develop skills, voice opinions, and build self-confidence** to navigate societal expectations

education played a reinforcing role

Educators who encourage critical thinking, provide mentorship, and challenge traditional gender roles are instrumental..., **especially male teachers who served as allies.**

Within the school compound they felt **free from threats** and had access to **food and clean water.**

Principle 3

Strengthen ecosystems to
promote girls' agency

Understanding & Engaging Girls' Agency Ecosystems

Girls' agency is shaped by interconnected systems: family, school, community, policy.

Ecosystems can enable or constrain agency through norms, resources, and opportunities.

We engaged diverse actors through dialogues, policy cafés, and participatory workshops.

Example: Ecosystem strengthening in Bangladesh

LAAGA designed and delivered a “powerful trilogy of interlinked activities”



Policy Café

- 20 National policymakers
- 20 media representatives
- 10 District education officers
- 20 Head teachers
- 20 CSOs
- 10 Community leaders
- 20 Parents

→ **Collective and role commitments**



Agency Allies

- 20 university students & teachers trained in LAAGA's GCM
- **Leading ongoing research, workshops, and other community-identified efforts**
- **DEO has requested for all teachers in district**



Girls' Agency Workshops

- 110 girls from 5 schools
- **Now working in Girls' Agency Clubs supported by schools**

Catalyzing Action: Building Commitment, Capacity & Cohesion

- Strengthened shared understanding and collective responsibility for girls' agency
- Co-designed follow-on actions: leadership spaces, mentoring, community engagement
- Early shifts show improved dialogue, support, and recognition of girls' voices

Principle 4

Challenge inequitable power dynamics

1. Supporting Girls' Participation & Removing Barriers

- **Girl-centered methodology** that treats girls as experts in their own lives;
- Engagement in **safe, comfortable, and familiar spaces**;
- Activities conducted in **girls' own languages** to ensure inclusion;
- **Provision** of transportation, food, drinks, and other support;
- **Meeting basic needs**, including menstrual hygiene products;
- Recognition that **inclusion** is ongoing (e.g., limited participation of girls with disabilities).

2. Centering Girls in Intergenerational Spaces

- **Girls engage directly** with families, educators, authorities, and media
- Spaces for **girls and adults to share stories**, reflect, and co-create actions
- **Girls' priorities**—including “big problems”—are not minimized even if solutions are complex



3. Calling Out Systems and Forces That Hold Girls Back

- **Girls examine systemic barriers:** gender norms, class, caste, race/ethnicity, colonial legacies
- Communities and **girls identify actions to hold authorities accountable** for rights and services
- Intentional focus on **naming and challenging inequitable power dynamics** across ecosystems

Recommendations

1. Center girls as **agents of change** (not just beneficiaries)
2. Teachers & schools as **transformative actors**
3. Parents & caregivers as **norm-shapers**
4. Communities as **enabling environments**
5. Governments as **system architects**
6. Researchers & practitioners as **evidence builders**



What Comes Next For LAAGA

Other Cases in Publication

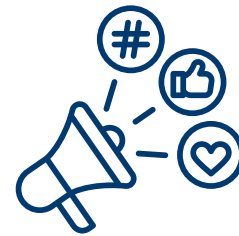
- **Jamaica:** Adolescent's Mothers Reintegration in the Formal School System.
- **Pakistan:** Girls' agency in Systematically Marginalized Communities of South Punjab.
- **Nigeria:** Perspectives on agency from out-of-schoolgirls in Nigeria.

Implementation and action phase on these cases (Systems strengthening)



Training & Learning

- Curricular Materials
- Interactive Guide
- Trainings
- Workshops



Media & Storytelling

- Podcasts
- Short Films
- Publications



Dialogue & Participation

- Public Dialogues
- Policy Cafes
- Intergenerational Talks
- “Dear Me” Letters



Leadership & Agency

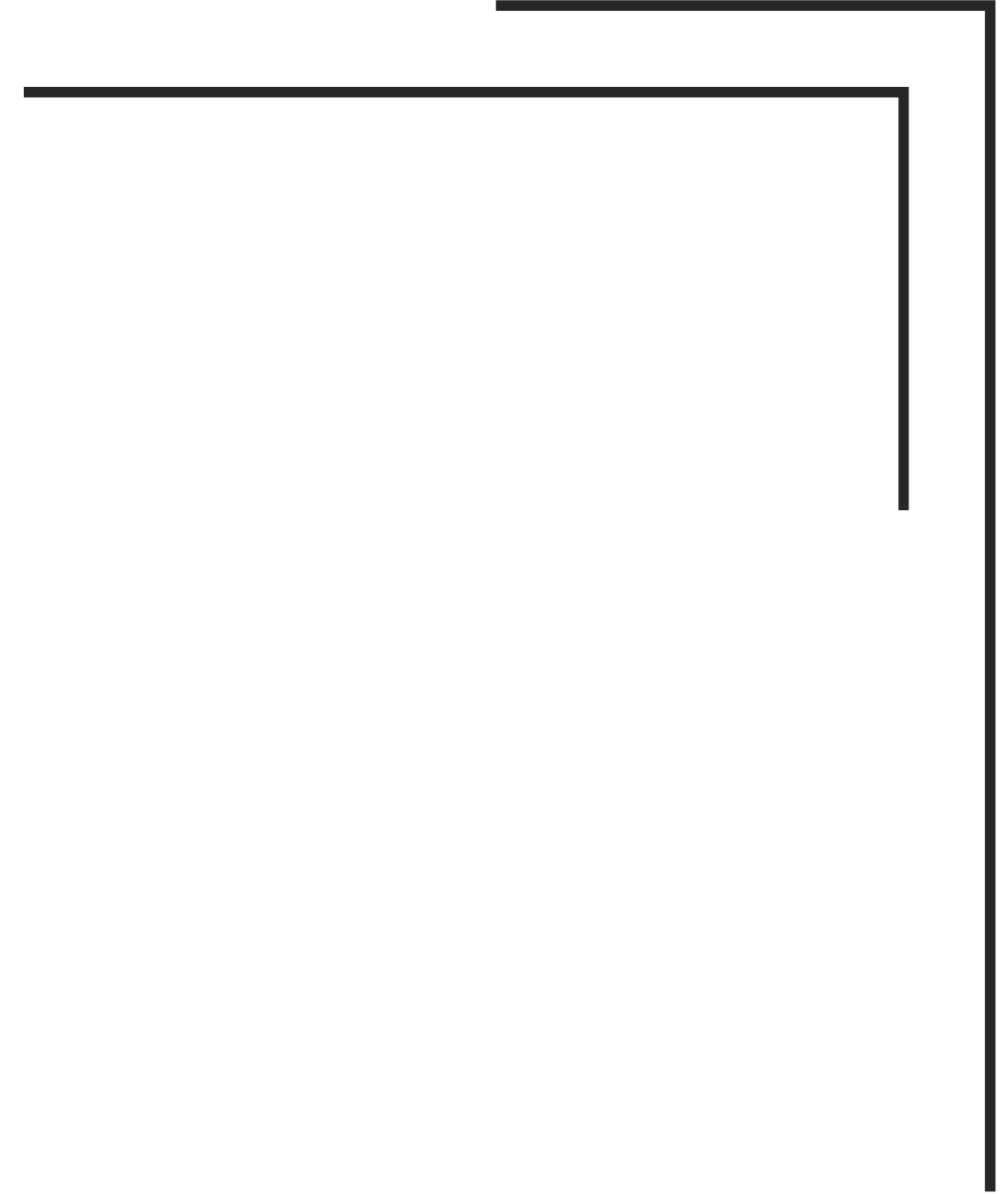
- Girl Agency Clubs (Change Champions)
- Role Models
- Peer Leaders

Future Goals and Plans

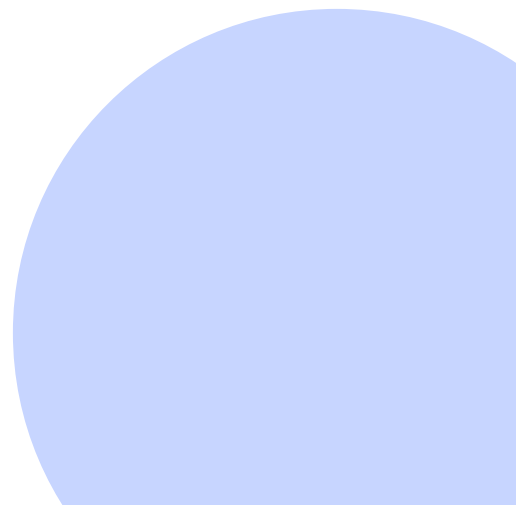
- Strengthen Cross-Sectoral Collaboration and Partnerships
- Expand Research (Phase 3 and Beyond) Across Contexts
- Deepen Girl-Centred and Participatory Methodologies
- Translate Research into Policy and Evidence-Based Practice
- Leverage Digital Innovation for Agency
- Ensure Sustainability and Scale

Vietnam Follow-on Case





Q&A





Closing Question:

**What is your priority
for moving forward
with this work?**

Stay In Touch

Read our most recent publications here:



www.brookings.edu/LAAGA

Sign up below to hear from us in the future:



laaga@brookings.edu



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Universal Education
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LAAGA
LEARNING AND ACTION ALLIANCE FOR GIRLS' AGENCY

Thank You!

