Grassroots Empowerment Approaches Give Girls A Voice: The Intersection Of SDGS 3, 4, & 5

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Abstract

Background/Rationale: Attention to the emotional, biological, social, and cognitive developmental needs of girls is critical for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 (Health & Wellbeing), SDG 4 (Quality Education) & 5 (Gender Equality). Girls' reproductive and sexual rights are highly controversial issues, along with a girl's right to education and a violence-free life. Given that the majority of girls ages 10-19 live in low- and middle-income countries, empowering and capacitating girls represents an unprecedented opportunity. Investing in girls yields many returns including reductions in early pregnancy and increased earning power, especially when girls have equal access to education.

Methodology: A case study approach highlights practices that ensure agency and positive development for girls, especially those more at risk of discrimination and oppression. A literature review explores the evidence-base for empowering girls, with special attention to what social workers need to know (Temin et al., 2018). When girls are simply added on to provisions aimed at women, girls' rights are minimized at the expense of empowering adult women political, socially, and economically (also important) (Plan International, 2017, p. 5). This requires a shift away from girls as beneficiaries, to agents of change for individual and collective empowerment.

Findings and Conclusions: A curriculum proposal on Social Work with Girls will identify evidence-based approaches such as mentor-led safe space groups, services & community engagement models, and inclusive intersectoral approaches that connect with boys and girls from other disempowered groups due to social status, ethnicity, or disability. Special attention is given to innovative micro, mezzo, and micro practice models that enhance girl's voice, control, and choice.

Keywords: Girls' Empowerment, Gender Equality, Girl's Education, Social Work

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Introduction: The Opportunity for Change

There are an estimated 1.2 billion adolescents aged 10-19 years today that make up 16% of the world's population. About half of them are girls, with most girls ages 10-19 living in low & middle-income countries. More than half of those live in Asia, while nearly a fourth live in Sub Saharan Africa. Empowering girls represents an unprecedented opportunity for global progress; Investing in girls yields many returns including reductions in early pregnancy, increased earning power, and overall healthier families and communities (Temin et al., 2018). These opportunities come with challenges that are based in the highly controversial issues related to girls' reproductive and sexual rights as compared to a girl's right to education and her right to be free from violence, which tend to have more acceptability. What happens to a girl's own body, whom to marry, who owns or inherits property, etc., are not consistently expressed in policies and laws (Plan International, 2017).

Attention to the emotional, biological, social, and cognitive developmental needs of girls is critical for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 (Good Health & Wellbeing) which directly intersects with SDG 4 (Quality Education) & 5 (Gender Equality). Girls' reproductive and sexual rights are highly controversial issues, along with a girl's right to education and her right to be free from violence. What happens to her own body, over whom to marry, to own property or inherit, are not consistently expressed in policy & practice (Population Council, 2017). Given that most girls ages 10-19 live in low- and middle-income countries, empowering and capacitating them represents an unprecedented opportunity to contribute to the health and wellbeing outcomes of their families and future generations of families. The hypothesis is that investing in girls yields many returns including reductions in early pregnancy and increased earning power, especially when girls are given equal access to an education (SDG 4 – Quality Education) (Population Council, 2016; 2017; United Nations, 2023).

According to UNICEF (2022), education is a lifeline for girls; men and boys are critical contributors or barriers to the empowerment of women and girls. Men's attitudes matter (UNICEF, 2022, p. 10)!

Objectives

This paper reviews the literature and research on girl's empowerment and the intersection of culture and gender norms within the context of the SDGs and rights-based approaches to the girl child. The evidence-base for empowering girls provides the basis for what social workers need to know for linking empowerment of the girl child and global progress (Temin et al., 2018). Approaches for capacitating social workers for practice with the girl child that ensures agency and positive development for girls, especially

those at higher risk of discrimination and oppression, are described using a qualitative case study methodology. A seven-module curriculum identifies and describes challenges and opportunities faced by girls and evidence-based interventions such as mentor-led safe space groups. Future agendas for social work research, education, and practice are highlighted.

Literature Review

1. The Girl Child, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Beijing Platform for Action

Girls' rights are codified within the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, and include non-discrimination, protection from harm and abuse, and full participation in family, social, and cultural life. Barriers to realizing these rights include practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), sex-selective abortions, and child marriage, each of which is common in geographically specific areas (Bureau of International Information Programs, United States Department of State, 2017, p. 188). In addition, the *1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, a visionary agenda for the empowerment of women, identified rights of the girl child as critical to the full realization of women's rights as human rights (United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, 2019).

2. Gender-Based Discrimination and Culture

The girl-child has risks across all countries, no matter the economic status. A 2018 study analyzing marriage license data from 41 US states found that at over 200,000 minors, 87% girls and 13% boys, were married in the United States between 2000 and 2015 (Tsui et al., 2018). Beginning in infancy, given the lower status of girls relative to boys, girls experience discrimination in areas of nutrition, health care, education, family care, and protections. Girls are often fed less, particularly when there are diminished food resources, leaving them at higher risk of childhood mortality (Bureau of International Information Programs, United States Department of State, 2017, pp. 189-190), especially in the face of humanitarian crises including war, financial, and natural disasters resulting from climate change (UNICEF, 2022). Intentional abortion of female fetuses and female infanticide are common practices in East and South Asian, resulting significant sex-ratio population imbalance. In India such practices are reinforced by the perception that daughters do not significantly contribute to the family income and large dowries are expected when girls marry. Efforts to end such practices with education, financial incentives and threat of punishment have led to little change (Bureau of International Information Programs, United States Department of State, 2017).

3. Girls Empowerment versus Girls as Beneficiaries of Services

Empowerment is defined as the expansion of choice and strengthening of voice through the transformation of power relations so [women and] girls have more control over their lives and futures. Empowerment is a process of ongoing change through which girls expand their aspirations, strengthen their voice, and exercise more choice (Temin et al., 2018; Plan International, 2017).

Many programs that aim to benefit girls do not ultimately empower them. Some programs combine cash transfers with girls' clubs, or school based sexual education with youth-friendly health services, but these efforts are not necessarily evidence-based (Temin et al., 2018). In some programs, girls are "simply" added on to provisions aimed at women, which serve to minimize girls' rights at the expense of empowering adult women politically, socially, and economically (also important) (Plan International, 2017, p. 5). Thus, a focus on empowerment requires a shift away from seeing girls as beneficiaries of health and development programs to viewing them as agents of change for individual and collective empowerment in their own right.

Girls' rights become framed in "soft law" (non-legally binding recommendation or guidelines) as a first step towards the main goal of empowering adult women political, socially, and economically, rather than realizing the rights of girls during childhood and adolescence as separate and independent of adult women's rights (Plan International, 2017, p. 5). Some of these programs have the potential to reinforce lack of power if empowerment isn't the ultimate goal. Empowerment must involve a process of social transformation enhancing control over their lives. As a girl's voice is strengthened, she speaks up and is heard. Voice leads to greater participation and greater influence and control in her own household. Empowerment is directly manifested through voice (Plan International, 2017).

4. Evidence-Based Approaches to Empowerment

Drawing on decades of thought, program work, evidence, and learning by academics, activists, implementers, and girls in the communities, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (n.d.) identifies empowerment as transforming unequal power relations that are reinforced by institutional structures and resources (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d., p. 6). The theory of change involves three interrelated processes and outcomes:

1. *Power* to (ability to make decisions and act)

2. *Power within* (self-esteem, dignity, self-worth), and

3. *Power with* (shared power for solidarity, collective action, mutual support) (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d., p. 3-4).

The result is agency defined as the capacity of girls to take purposeful action and pursue

goals, free from the threat of violence or retribution. Girls gain critical consciousness when they identify and question inequalities and question how power operates in their lives. It is critical that girls are given the opportunity to participate in governance to improve the status of girls. This gives girls access to and control over resources that include control over her physical and mental well-being that leads to bodily integrity (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d., p. 6).

A social development approach to change must include assets that are both tangible and intangible economic, social, or productive resources (Midgley, 2010). Knowledge and skills are fundamental to women and girls' ability to make informed choices and effectively exercise voice and agency. Women and girls gain social capital when they build relationships and social networks – strong networks provide solidarity. Empowerment requires inner change that connects with shifts in institutional structures and systems (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d., p. 6-9).

Methodology

1. Empowering the Girl Child: A Social Work Curriculum for Change

It is critical that social workers know and understand how investing in and empowering the girl child represents a unique opportunity for progress (Temin et al., 2018). Integrating a curriculum in social work education on *Empowering the Girl Child* is a key strategy for building the capacity of social workers to advance agency and give voice to girls 12-18 to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (Gender Equality), and related SDG's: SDG 4 (Quality Education); SDG 13 (Climate Action); SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions); and SDG 17 (Partnerships)). The proposed curriculum, embedded within the SDGs, reflects best practices in service-learning and social work field education, and responds to community-engaged and social justice learning outcomes. Specific empowerment-based knowledge and skills that capacitate social workers to give voice and choice to girls, including communication, leadership, and negotiation skills, are translated into a social work curriculum inclusive of practice exercises and reflections. The curriculum content identifies evidence-based approaches such as mentor-led safe space groups, services, and community engagement models, along with inclusive intersectoral approaches that connect with boys and girls from other disempowered groups due to social status, ethnicity, or disability. Innovative cross-practice (micro, mezzo, and macro) models target both the rights holders (girls and their communities) and duty bearers (parents and caregivers, governments, health, justice, & education institutions, etc.). The Topics covered in 7 modules include:

Module 1: Introduction and Overview: The 17 Sustainable Development Goals
(SDGs) and girls' empowerment
Module 2: Trauma-Informed, Theory of Change for Empowering the Girl Child

Module 3: Gender-based Violence (GBV) & Female Genital Mutilation (FGM

Module 4: Reproductive Rights, Menstrual Justice, & Health
       (Includes child marriage)

Module 5: Education & the Digital Divide

Module 6: Girls & Climate Change

Module 7: Empowerment of the Girl Child (Micro, Mezzo, & Macro Approaches)

(Davis & Rodgers, 2023)

2. Excerpt From Module 7: Standalone Programming for Girls: Creating Safe Spaces for Girls

Many effective youth programs center around safe spaces that allow youth who share similar experiences and challenges to connect, share ideas, and learn new skills. Safe spaces allow for constructive use of their non-school or work time that can lead to healing, empowerment, and resilience (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2020). Features that have been identified to likely promote positive outcomes in safe spaces and youth community programs include physical and psychological safety; clear and consistent structure and appropriate supervision; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; opportunities for skill building; ethical practice; anonymity; and behavior management processes (Lobo et al., 2010; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). According to Temin et al. (2018), programs that aim to empower adolescent girls should incorporate key components and delivery approaches to build assets that drive gender equity. These are specific evidence-based practices that direct social work intervention models:

- **Girls' groups.** Programs bring peers and mentors together in girl-only groups, organized by select categories (age, schooling, and/or marital status) with the aim to build supportive relationships, build girls' knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy, and link girls and their families with essential services and social institutions.

- **Safe Space.** Girls' group meetings take place in familiar, private, and safe venues such as community centers or classrooms after hours where they feel safe discussing sensitive topics.

- **Mentors.** Ideally, mentors are young women (18-25) from the local community who have experienced similar challenges to the program participants and trained to be role models and provide practice assistance and care in emergencies.

- **Empowerment content on gender and power.** Life-skills training content should be centered on sexual and reproductive health with explicit content on how to address gender norms and power dynamics in sexual

relationships.

- **Economic empowerment.** Programs should address the influence of economic factors on girls' participation and impact, while economically empowering girls directly (such as through cash transfers) or indirectly (such as through financial literacy training). These strategies potentially reduce parental opposition and help with the cost of participation.

- **Referral networks.** Mentors should be active participants with referral networks and with knowledge on how to refer program participants to relevant services and resources such as health, education, and social services, banks, as well as transportation services.

- **Community engagement.** The program should be embedded within the local community with staff, parents, and community members fully engaged and contributing to an environment enabling girls' participation that are not impeded by gender norms (Temin et al., 2018, Seven Components of Community-Based Empowerment Programming).

Implementation of safe space programming for girls needs to be intentionally designed and targeted to girls that are most marginalized (married, out-of-school, or living with disabilities); planned weekly meetings with girls that share similar characteristics; learner-centered and highly interactional pedagogical principles; mentors emphasize skill-based learning and critical thinking; and adequate training, supportive supervision, and opportunities for mentors to interact (Temin et al., 2018, Four Program Delivery Approaches).

Findings and Conclusions

A well-planned, trained, and supported social service workforce plays a critical role in identifying, preventing, and managing risks, and responding to situations of vulnerability and harm (UNICEF, 2019; UNICEF, 2021; Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, 2019). Given the unprecedented opportunities in working with youth across the globe, capacitating social workers with specific knowledge and skills to work with the girl child is a key entry point for global development and change. Curriculum development and expanded practice opportunities that are evidence-based and grounded within the local context fits within UNICEF's key strategy for advancing protection of children from all forms of violence (SDG 5-Gender Equality, SDG 8-Decent Work and Economic Growth, & SDG 16-Peace, Justice, & Strong Institutions).

Social work education and practicums have the potential to directly contribute to achieving the SDGs by strengthening the social service workforce (SDG 16-Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). During the students' field practicums, considered to be

the signature pedagogy of social work education (Wayne et al., 2019), students are serving the real needs of children, communities and families while learning evidence-based skills, and forming personal and professional values. The are working to address the root causes of injustice and inequality, build community cohesion, and empower individuals and communities. This curriculum integrates both top-down and bottom-up approaches, inclusive of micro, mezzo, and macro interventions, critical to fully enhance girl's voice, control, and choice. Cross-sector (health, education, social services, and justice) approaches employ an intersectoral lens inclusive of gender identity, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, culture, etc. In addition, men and boys become potential contributors rather than barriers to girls' empowerment. (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d., p. 10). Everyone benefits exponentially when women and girls are empowered.

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