

Conceptualizing “empowerment” for adolescent girls and young women within the context of sexual and reproductive health: perspectives from a qualitative study in Nigeria and Tanzania

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BACKGROUND

- Achieving gender equality is essential for global progress and facilitating women’s empowerment.
- The designers of sexual reproductive health and rights programming are faced with the dual challenge of understanding how empowerment happens and how to measure it whilst also acknowledging the heterogeneity of women and girls.

This study aimed to build a working definition of empowerment wholly informed by the perspectives of girls with low socioeconomic status.

METHODS

- The research focuses on girl residents in Tanzania and Nigeria and used qualitative research methods.
- Data was collected in three sites in Tanzania and two sites in Nigeria, aligned with delivery of the A360 Amplify program.
- Consisted of focus group discussions and key informant interviews with 56 girls and 27 stakeholders and gatekeepers (boyfriends, husband, parents and programme youth workers).
- Discussion guides were developed in English and then translated into Swahili, Hausa and Yoruba.
- Data was analyzed in MAXQDA software using an inductive approach to thematic analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1- Research Sample

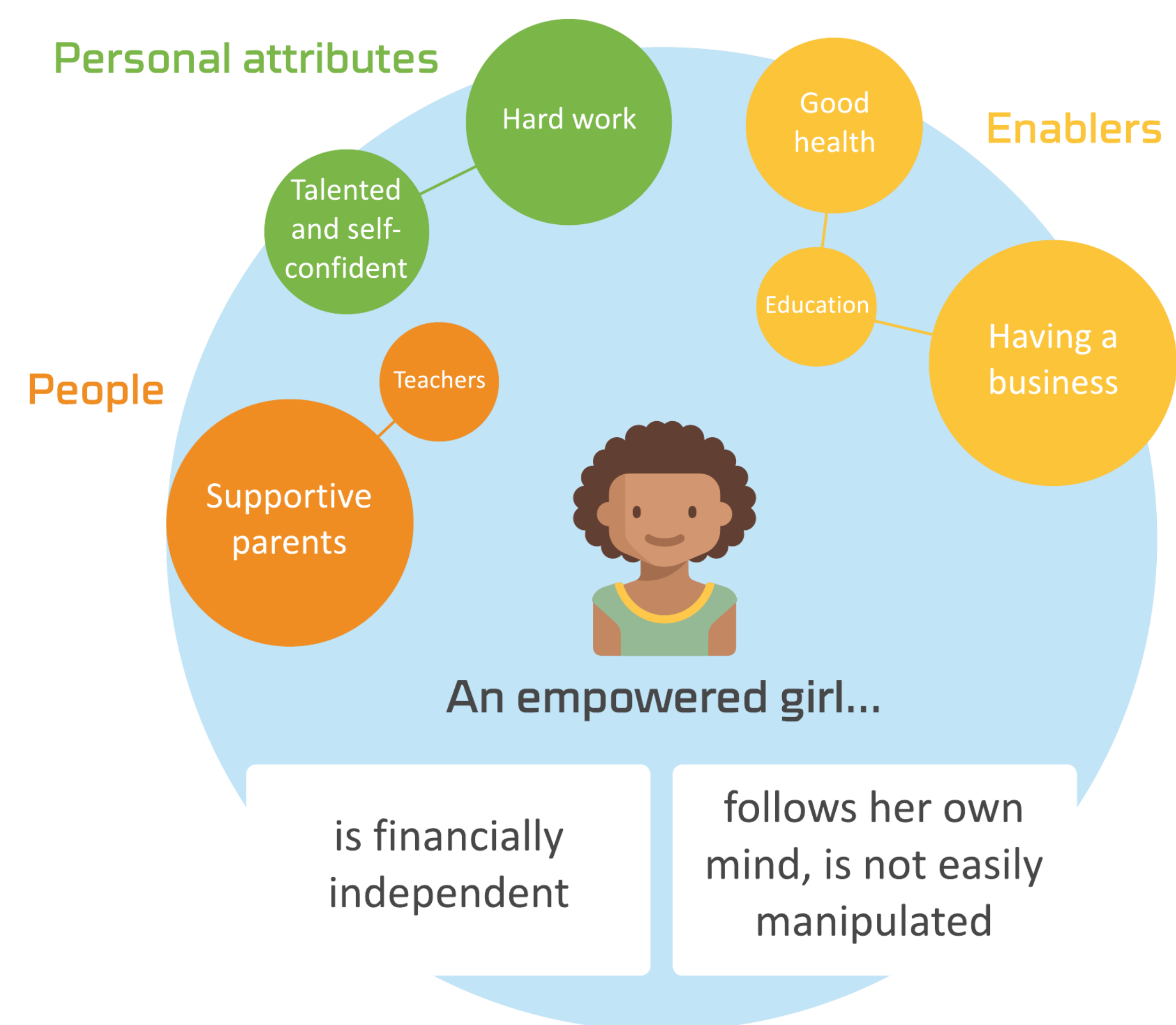
Participant Group	Nigeria	Tanzania
AGYW	30	35
Stakeholders	6	21
TOTAL	36	56

- An adolescent and young women’s (AGYW) definition of empowerment exists in a spectrum of factors.
- Girls’ interpretation of empowerment comprises constellations of descriptive factors, influenced by the complex realities that shape their lives.
- There was no single homogenous definition.
- Common themes emerging from the discussions with girls were: Education; Skills; Opportunity; Access to capital; Personal attributes; Level of support from gatekeepers.
- Participants gave particular importance to access to capital or economic empowerment.
- Empowerment was not always focused on individual goals or desires. It was also relational and socially driven.

“A picture that came to my mind is that of a girl whose parents were very poor, but she changed their situation. She went to work with different people at different times and gathers money to educate herself and when she leaves school, she gets a job and is able to support her parents to live a good life.”

(AGYW from Kaduna state, Nigeria)

Fig 1: Constellations of descriptive factors



Life stages and empowerment definitions

- Marriage affects the definition of empowerment, although there were disagreements over whether that change is positive or negative.
- In Tanzania, some girls felt that married girls may have more money and support to pursue economic activities, while others felt married girls might have greater responsibilities at home or a controlling husband limiting her empowerment.

“He becomes an obstacle when he sees her...because for some men they see ‘this girl, if she is given a skill for something, she can look down on me. She will not respect me’ so he can be an obstacle by saying ‘don’t continue with that thing you are taught, leave it alone, I by myself will provide for you’. That directly becomes an obstacle to a girl...”. (Tanzania)

- In Northern Nigeria girls felt that married girls have different pursuits and that a married woman may consider her children over herself.

“Married women focus on how to be empowered to care for their children but for unmarried single women, her main focus is to care for herself.” (Kaduna, Nigeria)

Gatekeepers and their influence on girls’ empowerment

- Male partners, friends, and immediate family members (parents and siblings) were often perceived as limiting girls’ empowerment.

“Parent decides when you marry, and you don’t have a choice. This has given me a lot of setbacks and I don’t like it. I want to be educationally empowered but my husband does not have the financial capability to send me to school.” (Kaduna, Nigeria)

CONCLUSION

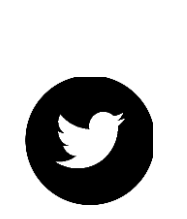
- We established that familiar qualitative methods can be effective in unpacking the complex theme of empowerment for AGYW.
- Girls’ understanding of empowerment is dynamic, personal and linked to their economic stability and subject to gatekeeper’s support.
- In developing empowerment indicators for promoting effective and holistic SRH programming for girls some implications to consider include:
 - Being aware of the spectrum of factors that shape girls’ empowerment goals
 - Girls’ capabilities and contexts shape their ability to achieve the goals they set and thus, indicators should be developed to illustrate this subjectivity
 - Indicators can reflect how a program facilitates girls to make choices and decisions and to achieve their goals
 - To be effective, programs may also work with the people that girls view as the gatekeepers to their empowerment (male partners, husbands, families)



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