

Practice Brief 1:

MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS'

EMPOWERMENT:

DEFINITIONS, OUTCOMES AND INDICATORS



1. Introduction

UNICEF Country Offices and partners use diverse approaches to measure adolescent girls' empowerment outcomes - from adapting global indicators to developing context-specific measures, from integrating empowerment constructs into sector monitoring to commissioning standalone studies. This practice brief supports these efforts by addressing common technical and strategic choices: how empowerment outcomes can be defined and structured, how indicators can be selected and contextualised, and how measurement can be aligned with CPD and national systems.

The brief is one of four linked resources:

- **Practice Brief 1** (this document):
Defining and measuring empowerment outcomes
- **Practice Brief 2:**
M&E practice with and for adolescent girls
- **Methodology notes:**
Measurement guidance for core indicators
- **Decision-making tool:**
An interactive tool for selecting appropriate M&E methods based on context and resources

These materials draw on the a research review which examined M&E practice and gathered perspectives from UNICEF staff, partners and adolescent girls involved in programmes across regions.

The brief is most useful when shaping theories of change and results frameworks, negotiating indicators with partners and government, or making sense of results.

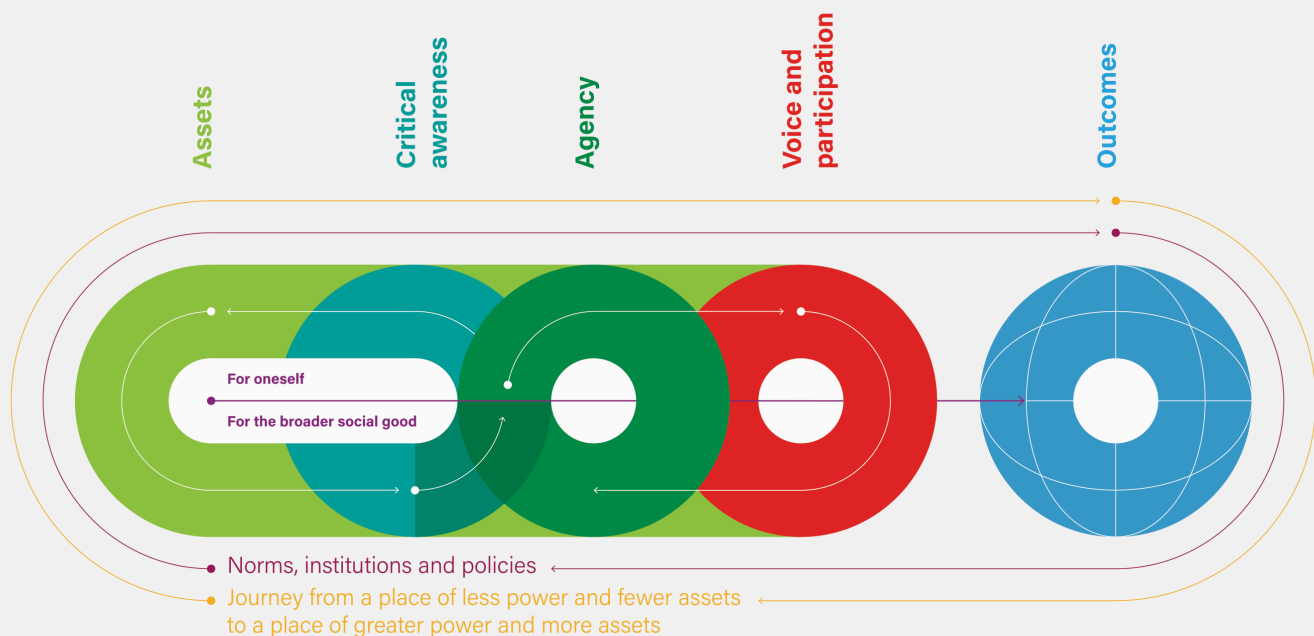
2. Defining girls' empowerment and articulating outcomes and indicators

Adolescent empowerment can be understood as a process through which a young person builds skills, resources and opportunities, develops confidence and self-awareness, and increases their ability to make choices and take part in decisions that affect their life and the world around them. This definition is drawn from UNICEF's Technical Note on Adolescent Empowerment (UNICEF, n.d., Technical Note: Adolescent Empowerment).

UNICEF describes this empowerment process as involving four closely connected components. Adolescents build assets, such as knowledge, skills, and access to resources and support. They develop critical awareness, including an understanding of who they are, their rights, and the social forces shaping their lives. They strengthen agency, meaning their ability to make choices and act on them. They also develop and exercise voice and participation, through opportunities to express views and be involved in decisions that affect them.

Together, these processes enable adolescents to move towards having greater confidence, capacity and space to shape their own futures. The components are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. Supporting one component in isolation, without attention to the others, is unlikely to result in meaningful empowerment.

A Framework for Empowerment



A Framework for Empowerment represents the dynamic and interconnected nature of the four components of empowerment – **assets, critical awareness, agency and voice and participation** – that taken together enhance adolescents' abilities to make informed choices and negotiate a safe transition to adulthood.

Figure 1: (UNICEF, n.d., <https://www.unicef.org/adolescent-empowerment-technical-note>)

Implications for measurement

This framework shapes how empowerment can be meaningfully measured in three ways. First, it means that effective M&E needs to capture change across all four components rather than focusing narrowly on one dimension such as knowledge or skills. Second, because the components are mutually reinforcing, measurement approaches need to account for how progress in one area may depend on or enable progress in others. Third, since empowerment is understood as a process rather than a fixed state, measurement needs to track direction and patterns of change over time, not just status at a single point.

These implications become concrete in the choices Country Offices make about ToC development and results frameworks - the focus of the sections that follow.

3. Adolescent girls' empowerment in Theories of Change

A strong theory of change for adolescent girls' empowerment starts with a clear working definition of empowerment and uses it to organise the programme's logic. This means describing intended change across all four empowerment components - assets, critical awareness, agency, and voice and participation - and explaining how progress in one area is expected to reinforce progress in others over time.

Just as important is making the enabling environment explicit. The four components describe changes in adolescents themselves. But the cross-cutting element of the UNICEF framework - the enabling environment (social norms, institutions and policies) - determines whether girls can translate knowledge, confidence or voice into real choices. Theories of change therefore need to articulate pathways that work across the socio-ecological model: individual, interpersonal (caregivers, peers, intimate partners), community (leaders, networks, informal power structures), and institutional (schools, health facilities, service providers, policy actors).

Making these multi-level pathways visible reflects the reality that girls' ability to exercise decision-making power is shaped by the people and systems around them, not by individual capacity alone. It helps avoid placing responsibility for empowerment solely on girls themselves.

The Dawwie initiative in Egypt - a national initiative to which UNICEF contributes - illustrates this approach. Its theory of change explicitly links individual-level changes in girls' voice, skills and access to services with simultaneous shifts in social norms through engagement with parents, community members, service providers and policy actors. By showing how change at multiple levels is interconnected, the framework supports a more comprehensive and gender-transformational understanding of empowerment.

Good practice also involves being explicit about the level of ambition a programme is pursuing, including whether it aims for gender-transformational change. This shapes both what gets measured and how results are interpreted.

4. Articulating empowerment outcomes

4.1 Moving from the Theory of Change to outcome-level results

A results framework translates a theory of change into a set of measures that can show whether change is happening for girls, and whether the conditions that enable or constrain empowerment are shifting. For adolescent girls' empowerment programming, outcomes are a particularly important focus. Outputs tend to capture what programmes do, rather than whether girls' power, opportunities or decision-making are changing. Impacts, by contrast, often unfold over longer periods than most monitoring and evaluation frameworks are designed to assess.

Well-articulated outcomes draw on the UNICEF adolescent empowerment framework to address assets, critical awareness, agency, and voice and participation comprehensively, rather than focusing narrowly on a single dimension. Importantly, these components should be expressed in ways that are meaningful for girls' lived realities, recognising that the types of assets that matter, the choices that are available, and the risks associated with exercising voice are often shaped by gender norms and age-based hierarchies.

A perspective based on the socio-ecological model (Figure 2) further strengthens outcome measurement by making explicit where change is expected to occur. At the individual level, outcomes may relate to girls' knowledge, self-efficacy or decision-making capacity. At the interpersonal level, outcomes often concern relationships with caregivers, peers or mentors, including shifts in communication, support or control. At the community and institutional levels, outcomes may involve changes in social norms, service accessibility, referral pathways, or the responsiveness of schools, youth centres or local authorities.

Articulating outcomes across these levels strengthens both the comprehensiveness and credibility of the results framework.

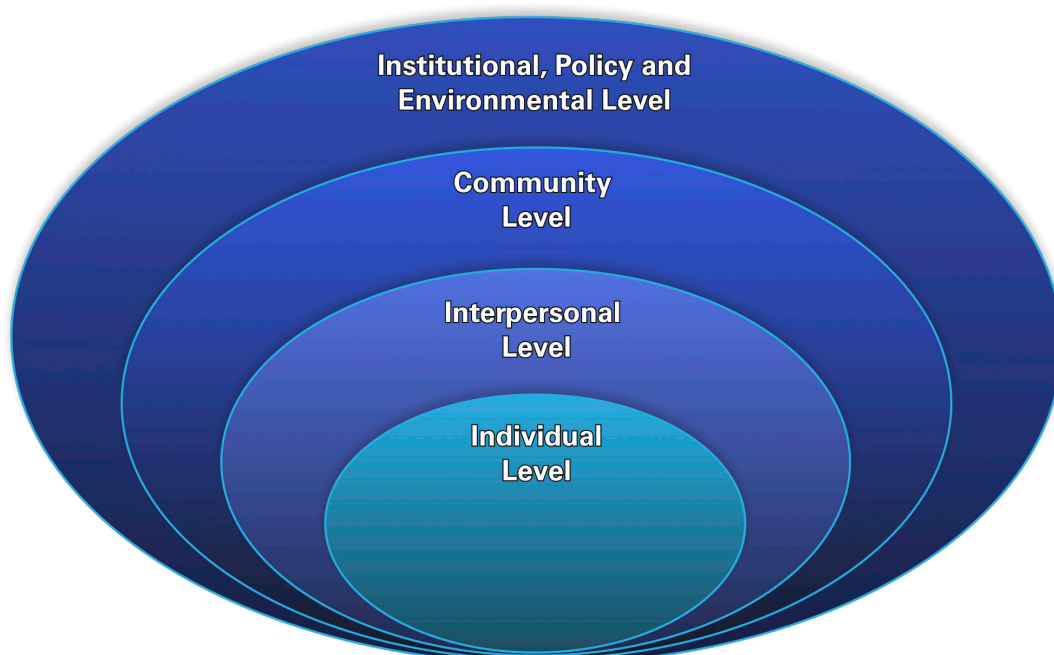


Figure 2: The Socio-Ecological Model

The Dawwie initiative, described in Box 1, below, is an example demonstrating how these multi-level links explicit support a more comprehensive approach to outcome articulation and measurement.

Box 1. Case study: Dawwie (Egypt) - Articulating and monitoring adolescent girls' empowerment outcomes

The National Girls' Empowerment Initiative (Dawwie) in Egypt provides a strong example of how adolescent girls' empowerment outcomes can be articulated and monitored in a way that is holistic, gender responsive, and explicitly gender transformational in intent.

Designed as a girl-centred initiative that addresses the root causes of gender inequality, Dawwie combines efforts to strengthen girls' individual empowerment with deliberate actions to shift the social norms, relationships and institutional conditions that shape their lives.

Dawwie's outcome framework encompasses all four empowerment components: assets, critical awareness, agency, and voice and participation. These outcomes are framed in ways that reflect girls' lived realities, recognising that gender norms and age-based hierarchies influence which assets matter, which choices are available, and whether girls can exercise voice safely and meaningfully.

The initiative also applies a clear socio-ecological perspective, with outcomes articulated at multiple levels. Individual-level change among girls is linked to changes at the interpersonal level (including parents, peers and mentors), the community level (such as social norms, dialogue and acceptance of girls' participation), and the institutional level (including access to services, responsiveness of schools and youth centres, and engagement with policy actors). This framing helps position girls' empowerment as part of a wider system of change, rather than as isolated individual gains.

Dawwie's theory of change and results framework also connect girls' empowerment outcomes to broader enabling conditions. This supports more credible assessment of progress towards gender-transformational change by examining not only whether girls report increased confidence or skills, but whether their environments are becoming more supportive of girls' rights, decision-making and leadership.

A key finding from the Dawwie evaluation was that measurement was stronger for individual-level outcomes than for community- and institutional-level change. This highlights the importance of adequate resourcing, timeframes and tools to track higher-level and longer-term transformation.

For more information, see <https://dawwie.net/en/about-dawwie>

Good practice also involves being explicit about the level of ambition a programme is pursuing. While most programmes that focus on adolescent girls address gender-specific constraints and can be considered gender responsive, not all aim to achieve transformational change. Outcome articulation should therefore make clear whether, and at what levels, more fundamental shifts in power relations and norms are expected.

This may include outcomes related to reductions in harmful gender attitudes, increased acceptance of girls' decision-making, or changes in institutional practices that support girls' rights. Making these distinctions explicit strengthens both the coherence of the results framework and the ability to assess progress over time.

4.2 Moving from outcomes to indicators

Empowerment outcomes describe what change a programme is trying to achieve for adolescent girls. Indicators are used to check whether those changes are starting to happen, and whether the conditions that support or limit girls' empowerment are also shifting.

In adolescent girls' empowerment programming, this distinction matters because indicators can only capture partial signals of change. Empowerment is a complex and socially embedded process, and no single indicator can fully reflect concepts such as agency, voice or shifts in social norms.

Therefore indicator selection is not a neutral technical task. Poorly chosen indicators can inadvertently narrow attention to what is easiest to measure, rather than what is most meaningful in girls' lives. Good practice therefore involves selecting indicators that are clearly linked to the intended empowerment outcomes, adapting them to the local context and relevant subgroups, and interpreting them alongside qualitative evidence.



4.3 Linking empowerment outcomes to UNICEF planning and national systems

Empowerment measurement is most likely to be used and sustained when indicators are aligned with the CPD and with relevant national strategies and sector plans. Alignment affects what can realistically be measured, how findings will be interpreted, and whether results can be discussed credibly with government and other partners.

In practice, empowerment outcomes and indicators should be checked for fit in three directions. First, fit with the CPD results framework and associated planning and reporting, including annual work planning. Second, fit with the national strategies and sector plans the programme is designed to support. Third, coherence with UNICEF's [Gender Equality Action Plan \(UGEAP\)](#) and the [UNICEF Gender Equality Policy \(2021-2030\)](#), and related corporate results frameworks, so measurement strengthens existing accountability commitments rather than creating a parallel set of measures.

This work also supports sustainability. Empowerment measurement is more likely to continue when it is integrated into data sources that already recur. Depending on context, this can include DHS and MICS, but often it depends more on national household surveys, school-based surveys, and routine administrative systems and dashboards within sectors such as education, health, and social protection. The same principle applies to programme-commissioned baselines and endlines: prioritise instruments that can be repeated and explained over time, rather than one-off bespoke tools.

Where existing systems do not capture a priority empowerment construct, it can be efficient to add a small number of tested items to an existing survey round or monitoring study. Validated scales can help when comparability matters, while still leaving space for contextualised items and qualitative interpretation that explains drivers of change.

In most settings, indicator choices come down to balancing four considerations: relevance to CPD, national priorities and UGEAP commitments; feasibility and frequency without building a parallel system; equity and disaggregation; and ownership and use, including a plan for analysis and follow-up once data are available.

5. Selecting and adapting indicators

5.1 Standardised and validated indicators: advantages and limits

Standardised indicators can be useful because they support comparison across programmes, contexts and time, and because well-established measures generally have good evidence for their reliability and validity. They are commonly drawn from large surveys or long-running research programmes and are widely used in monitoring and evaluation.

Large-scale survey programmes, such as the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), provide commonly used measures related to decision-making and gender attitudes. For example, DHS includes questions on who has the final say over matters such as health care, major household purchases and visiting family or relatives. These measures are familiar to practitioners and allow results to be compared across countries and over time.

There are also standardised measures developed specifically for adolescents. The Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS), for example, provides a set of quantitative and qualitative tools designed for younger adolescents, including measures related to gender norms, attitudes and contextual factors that shape empowerment.

Standardised, validated empowerment scales are valuable because they support consistent measurement and enable comparison across settings. However this does not mean that we can be completely sure that items carry the same meaning across languages, contexts and subgroups of girls. Norms, risk, and social desirability can affect how questions are understood and answered, and some items may function differently for different groups (for example by age, schooling status or disability). For this reason, standardised scales should be carefully tested before use, and ideally interpreted alongside contextual and qualitative evidence.

Box 2. Practical Guidance on Girls' Empowerment Indicators: Methodology Notes

The following examples link to methodology notes setting out detailed descriptions of how to collect, analyse and report on data against the specified indicators.

- **Freedom of movement:** Percentage of adolescent girls who report having freedom of movement, measured using tools from the Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS) and Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE).
- **Voice:** Percentage of adolescent girls who report being able to express their opinions and be heard, measured using tools from GEAS and GAGE.
- **Decision-making:** Percentage of adolescent girls who report participating in and influencing decisions that directly affect their lives, measured using GEAS and the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS).
- **Harmful gender attitudes:** Proportion of respondents who hold gender-equitable attitudes. Respondents may include girls, boys, and family or community members. Measures are based on the Gender-Equitable Men (GEM) Scale.
- **Self-esteem:** Percentage of adolescent girls who report high self-esteem, measured using the Adolescent Self-Esteem Questionnaire (ASQ).

Box 3 in section 5.3 demonstrates how similar indicators have been applied in practice through the Dawwie initiative.

5.2 Contextualisation: age, inclusion and subgroup suitability

Indicator suitability needs to be checked across different social groups - especially age groups and marginalised populations. Early adolescence and later adolescence can differ significantly in what aspects of empowerment such as "agency" and "participation" look like, what decisions are salient, and what is socially permitted. As such, measures developed for one age band may not transfer well to another without careful testing, if at all ([GEAS, n.d.](#)).

Contextualisation also includes inclusion and accessibility. Indicators and tools may perform differently for girls who face intersecting constraints related to disability, schooling status, displacement, marital status, poverty, or minority identity. A results framework that aims to support equity therefore benefits from explicit disaggregation expectations and, where needed, subgroup-specific items or approaches that capture distinctive constraints and risks.

5.3 Interpreting standardised measurement

A robust approach to empowerment outcome measurement may combine:

- core standardised indicators for comparability,
- additional locally grounded indicators to capture the most consequential expressions of empowerment in that setting, and
- mixed methods to interpret meaning and explain differences across groups.

This layered approach is particularly important where programmes aim for gender-transformational outcomes, because shifts in norms and power relations are rarely captured adequately through survey metrics and often require contextual explanation.

The Dawwie initiative, introduced in Box 1, demonstrates practical application of standardised empowerment indicators aligned with the methodology notes.

Box 3. Case study: Examples of Dawwie outcome indicators

Dawwie monitored adolescent girls' empowerment using indicators drawn from UNICEF's Gender Action Plan and Programme Measurement Framework, including:

- Percentage of girls reporting freedom of movement
- Percentage of girls reporting they can voice their opinions
- Percentage of girls reporting they make or influence decisions affecting their lives
- Girls' sense of self-worth and self-efficacy
- Percentage of girls, boys and community members holding harmful gender attitudes

These indicators capture change across empowerment components and link individual outcomes to broader normative shifts. As shown in Box 2, these indicators align closely with those detailed in the accompanying methodology notes, demonstrating how standardised measures can be contextualised and applied at scale in national programming.

(From '[Evaluation of the National Girls' Empowerment Initiative](#) – Dawwie', UNICEF Egypt, 2024)

6. Implications for measuring adolescent girls' empowerment

Empowerment outcomes are most effectively articulated across assets, critical awareness, agency, and voice and participation, reflecting the interlinked nature of empowerment processes. Indicators function as partial signals of change and are most informative when interpreted alongside qualitative evidence and contextual knowledge, including girls' participation. Where programmes seek gender-transformational change, outcome frameworks benefit from making this ambition explicit.

This Practice Brief establishes a conceptual and analytical foundation for outcome-focused measurement of adolescent girls' empowerment, and is designed to be used alongside the methodology notes for selected indicators. Practice Brief 2 and the decision-making tool build on this foundation, focusing on practical method choices, participatory and qualitative approaches, adaptive learning, and ways of capturing complex and emergent change in adolescent girls' lives.



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Wherever he lives.
Every child deserves a childhood.
A future.
A fair chance.
That's why UNICEF is there.
For each and every child.
Working day in and day out.
In more than 190 countries and
territories.
Reaching the hardest to reach.
The furthest from help.
The most excluded.
It's why we stay to the end.
And never give up.

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