

Practice Brief 2:

MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS'

EMPOWERMENT:

METHODS, PARTICIPATION AND ADAPTIVE LEARNING

1. Introduction and purpose

This practice brief supports UNICEF Country Offices and implementing partners to design M&E approaches for adolescent girls' empowerment that are practical, safe and fit for purpose. It focuses on method choice, participatory and adaptive approaches, and working effectively within real-world constraints.

Practice Brief 1 establishes the empowerment framework and guides outcome and indicator selection. This brief builds on that foundation by addressing how to measure empowerment outcomes in practice: which methods are appropriate for different contexts and questions, how to combine approaches for depth and credibility, and how to interpret findings when change is non-linear or contradictory.

This is the second of four linked resources:

- **Practice Brief 1** sets out the empowerment framework and supports the selection of outcomes and indicators.
- **Practice Brief 2** (this document) focuses on M&E practice with and for adolescent girls, including method choice, and adaptive learning
- **The Methodology Notes** developed for specific empowerment indicators provide detailed guidance for application and analysis
- **The Decision-Making Tool** helps teams select appropriate methods based on context and resources

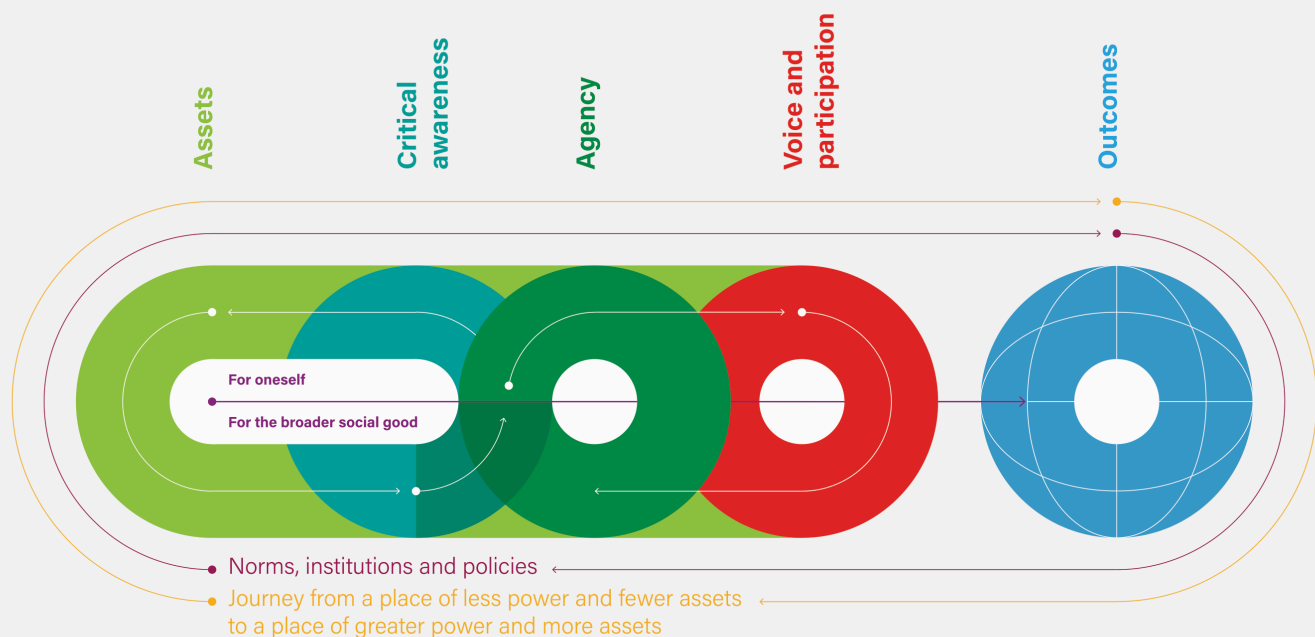
Together, these resources support teams to generate evidence that is credible, useful for learning and accountability, and safe for adolescent girls.



Defining empowerment

Empowerment is the process through which adolescent girls build assets (knowledge, skills, resources), develop critical awareness (understanding of rights and social forces), strengthen agency (ability to make and act on choices), and exercise voice and participation in decisions that affect their lives (see Practice Brief 1 for the full framework).

In practice, this means change happens across multiple dimensions at once. A girl may gain confidence to speak up in class while also learning about her rights and building supportive peer relationships. These changes reinforce each other, but they also depend on whether the environment around her—teachers, caregivers, peers, institutions, norms—shifts to support her 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: A Framework For Empowerment (UNICEF, n.d., [Technical Note: Adolescent Empowerment](#))

Empowerment outcomes may shift unevenly across dimensions and levels, and they may not move in sync. The measurement challenge is therefore how to interpret partial or mixed patterns of change, including where constraints in the enabling environment are limiting progress. Three implications for M&E follow.

Three considerations for measuring empowerment

- **Change is rarely linear or even.**

Progress in one area (such as girls' knowledge) may happen faster than change in another area (such as shifts in social norms or institutional practices). Different groups of girls may also experience change at different speeds.

- **Measuring empowerment requires looking across levels.**

Not just at what changes for individual girls, but also at relationships, norms, and how systems respond to girls.

- **Method choice matters.**

The tools used, the quality of measurement, and how findings are interpreted all shape whether the evidence generated is meaningful and useful for learning and adaptation.



2. Planning M&E for empowerment outcomes

Effective M&E starts with clear learning questions, an agreed purpose for the evidence, and a plan for how findings will be used. Strong M&E plans balance learning and reporting needs, set out how change will be assessed over time, document methodological trade-offs, and specify practical arrangements for feasibility, quality, and safeguarding.

Articulate clear outcome questions: Clear outcome questions help teams decide what to measure, for which groups of girls, and over what timeframe. Outcomes should connect to the programme Theory of Change and distinguish between girls' capabilities and agency (individual level), relationships and social norms (interpersonal and community level), and institutional factors that shape opportunity (systems level). These levels change at different speeds and may require different methods.

Design for learning over time

Empowerment outcomes are rarely captured well through one-off measurement. Build regular moments for review and reflection—when monitoring data are reviewed, questions are prioritised, and targeted follow-up is planned. A practical approach typically involves routine monitoring (possibly monthly or quarterly), periodic deep-dives in selected sites (e.g. every 6-12 months), and participatory reflection with girls and implementers (at key moments, as defined by the programme).

Options for tracking change over time include repeated cross-sectional surveys, qualitative panels with the same girls, or revisiting sentinel sites periodically. These can be combined with routine monitoring to interpret patterns and flag where further investigation is needed.

Regular review works best when it specifies what information will be reviewed, who will be involved (including, where safe, girls themselves), and how decisions will be recorded and followed up.

Managing methodological trade-offs

Every method involves trade-offs. Participatory approaches deepen relevance but are harder to standardise. Validated scales strengthen comparability but may require adaptation. Digital approaches increase reach but can exclude girls without safe access. Plans should be explicit about these trade-offs and include mitigation measures such as triangulating across sources, conducting follow-up qualitative work in selected sites, and applying clear confidentiality and safety protocols. When constraints shape method choice, interpretation should be explicit about what the evidence can and cannot say.

3. Selecting and combining methods

This section outlines approaches for measuring empowerment outcomes. In practice, combining approaches often produces the most useful evidence.

Participatory approaches

Participatory approaches involve adolescent girls in shaping M&E - in design, data collection, interpretation, or action planning. When done well, these approaches make measurement more grounded in girls' realities, strengthen credibility through joint sense-making, and are empowering in their own right.

Participation in M&E can support girls to articulate what change means to them, build skills in inquiry and analysis, and exercise voice in decisions about how their experiences are represented. The Girls at the Centre research found that adolescent girls valued being involved in M&E processes.

As one girl in Morocco explained: "We want to be part of designing programmes, not just receiving information. When our ideas are used, when we see results from our feedback, that's when we know our voices matter." A girl in Tajikistan similarly emphasised: "When we help decide what questions to ask and how to collect data, we learn new skills and feel more confident. It shows that adults trust us."

Participation is particularly valuable for refining theories of change in language girls recognise, improving tools for sensitive topics, strengthening interpretation of findings, and supporting accountability by sharing results back to girls.

Common options include co-design workshops, adolescent advisory groups, girls as peer researchers (with training and support), participatory service assessments, and creative methods such as Photovoice, participatory video, body mapping, and diaries.

Safeguarding remains essential. Teams should ensure age-appropriate consent processes, clear confidentiality protocols and referral pathways, training and support for facilitators, and realistic expectations about time demands. It is important to address power dynamics between adults and girls, and among girls themselves. Where girls take on data collection roles, they should receive appropriate training, compensation, and psychosocial support.



Box 1**Case study: Centring girls in M&E design**

ICRW's "Meet Them Where They Are" study illustrates how involving adolescent girls from the start can strengthen research and evaluation. Through participatory exercises, girls identified the risks that mattered most in their lives. While the study was initially framed around HIV vulnerability, girls consistently highlighted unintended pregnancy and pressure to engage in relationships as more immediate concerns. This reshaped the research focus. Girls' participation continued as peer educators and youth researchers, and they later reflected on perceived changes. Involving girls across the cycle strengthened outcome relevance and supported more meaningful interpretation. ([ICRW](#), 2016)

Box 2**Case study: Girls as co-researchers and co-facilitators**

The UNICEF Indonesia endline evaluation illustrates how adolescent girls can contribute meaningfully to data collection. Adolescent facilitators supported surveys, co-facilitated focus groups, and led activities on menstrual health management. The process concluded with a collective sense-making session where adolescent facilitators reflected on findings. Engaging girls supported richer discussion of sensitive topics and strengthened interpretation by grounding findings in girls' own perspectives. ([UNICEF Indonesia](#), 2025.)

Qualitative methods explore girls' lived experiences and help explain why change is (or is not) occurring. They are especially valuable when empowerment shifts are subtle or shaped by social norms not visible in surveys.

Key approaches include in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participatory group methods (such as mapping or ranking), observation in programme settings, and case studies following girls' experiences over time. Creative methods, such as Photovoice, participatory video, body mapping, or storytelling, can be particularly useful with adolescents and for sensitive or under-researched topics.

Quantitative approaches: detect patterns across groups and locations and support comparability over time. In empowerment programming, quantitative evidence is often most useful when combined with qualitative or participatory work.

Routine monitoring systems provide timely signals on service access, participation, and implementation quality. Dashboards and regular reviews help identify where course correction is needed. Validated scales strengthen consistency but often require adaptation to language, age, and context. Teams should pilot and sense-check tools with girls, document adaptations to any standard wording, and (where possible) to keep surveys short, especially for repeat measurement exercises.

Box 3

Case study: Using routine monitoring for adaptive management

In Tajikistan, UNICEF and partners use an ActivityInfo dashboard (visualised through Power BI) to consolidate disaggregated participation data alongside qualitative inputs. The dashboard has been used to identify uneven participation across districts, prompting inquiry and adjustments to outreach approaches. This shows how routine data, when reviewed regularly, can support adaptive management without large-scale surveys. (UNICEF MENARO 2025.)

Digital methods (e.g., SMS surveys, U-Report, mobile diaries) can enable rapid and efficient check-ins with target groups, or reach girls for whom it may not be possible to engage with face-to-face. However, they bring their own constraints that must be carefully considered and appropriately mitigated. Girls may be excluded by design – for example, due to low literacy, a lack of access to devices, or connectivity. In contexts where online activity may be monitored, girls may be cautious about engaging in digital M&E activities. Even where actual risk is low, perceived risk can reduce participation and limit candour, affecting both safety and data quality.

Plans should test questions with girls, keep participation voluntary, provide offline alternatives, blend online and offline routes, and monitor who is systematically excluded. It is important to interpret findings with these factors and potential biases in mind.

Longitudinal perspectives are particularly valuable because empowerment processes unfold over time, and single-point measurement often misses the direction or pace of change. Longitudinal approaches track the same girls, sites, or cohorts over multiple time points, making it possible to observe trajectories rather than snapshots. This is especially valuable for understanding how individual-level changes (such as confidence or knowledge) relate to slower shifts in social norms or institutional practices.

Practical options include quantitative panels that revisit the same cohort for comparability over time, qualitative panels with repeat in-depth interviews to explore how girls' circumstances and perspectives evolve, sentinel sites where teams return periodically to selected locations for deeper inquiry, and participatory diaries or timeline exercises where safe and appropriate.

Longitudinal work can bring practical challenges to manage. Girls' circumstances change: they move, marry, leave school, or become unavailable. Attrition is rarely random - girls facing the greatest constraints are often hardest to follow up. Teams should anticipate differential drop-out, interpret findings as indicative where attrition is substantial, and be transparent in reporting about who was retained and who was lost to follow-up.

Mixed methods approaches combine breadth with depth and explanation, and are generally considered best practice for monitoring and evaluating girls' empowerment. They help distinguish whether change occurred from why it occurred, for whom, and under what conditions. The various methods above can be used in different combinations to complement one another. For example, a programme may use quantitative surveys to detect patterns and trends, qualitative work to understand pathways of change and to explore nuances and contradictions, and participatory sense-making with girls and other stakeholders to bring together all of the data and interpret findings.

Box 4: **Working with AI in M&E**

AI tools can support M&E processes in many ways, particularly by speeding up routine tasks, allowing teams to focus on interpretation, validation with girls, and adaptive decision-making. This can include transcribing interviews, organising open-ended responses, translating data and supporting initial coding.

However, the use of AI tools requires careful planning and execution, and the incorporation of important checks and balances to ensure that M&E quality is enhanced, and that risks are mitigated if not avoided altogether. Additional considerations for AI include: teams should use only approved systems, de-identify data before processing, and ensure that sensitive information is not entered into unapproved tools.

It is especially important to recognise that AI systems are predominantly trained on data from the Global North and may misinterpret language, context, or meaning from adolescent girls in other settings. AI tools can also reinforce gender biases present in training data ([Buolamwini & Gebre, 2018](#)). Teams should review outputs carefully, involve team members who understand local context, document what was used, and be transparent when reporting findings. Ensuring that a human remains systematically and deliberately in the loop for analysis and interpretation is the primary concern, alongside documentation and transparency.

See: UNICEF's Policy Guidance on AI for Children ([UNICEF Innocenti, 2025](#)).



4. Feasibility, ethics and inclusion in M&E design

M&E systems for adolescent girls' empowerment operate within practical constraints that shape what evidence can be generated and how it should be interpreted. Recognising these constraints at the design stage supports more inclusive data collection and more credible analysis.

Ethics, safeguarding and contextual considerations

Work with adolescent girls requires particularly careful attention to ethics and safeguarding. Consent and assent procedures, confidentiality, referral pathways and facilitator capacity are integral to M&E quality, particularly where data collection involves sensitive topics such as sexual and reproductive health, violence or harmful social norms.

All research with children must prioritise children's safety and wellbeing. Critical practices include: age-appropriate consent and assent; clear referral pathways that exist and are accessible before data collection begins; staff training in child safeguarding, recognising distress, and managing power dynamics; confidentiality protocols that protect girls' identities; and avoiding raising expectations that cannot be met.

Meaningful consent requires explaining the purpose in clear language, being honest about how data will be used, recognising power dynamics, understanding local legal requirements, and providing genuine choice to decline without consequences.

Before finalising tools, it is valuable to review questions with girls (where appropriate), local partners, and front-line staff to test both feasibility and safety in context. This should include an explicit check of household and community dynamics—often shaped by gender and age hierarchies—which can affect whether a girl can participate privately, whose permission is required, and which topics can be discussed without risk.

Stakeholder characteristics and inclusion

Literacy, language, disability, access to phones or digital platforms, and girls' freedom of movement all shape who is able to participate in data collection. Without explicit planning, M&E systems tend to reflect the experiences of girls who are easiest to reach, rather than those facing the greatest constraints.

Inclusive M&E design requires deliberate strategies to ensure that the perspectives of more marginalised girls are captured. This may include oversampling specific groups, adapting tools and modes of data collection, allowing flexibility in timing and location, and working through trusted intermediaries such as Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) and women/girl-led organisations. Such approaches support meaningful disaggregation and make intersecting inequalities visible in analysis, strengthening both the credibility and usefulness of findings.

Enumerator and facilitator selection affects trust and disclosure. Teams should consider matching by gender and language where this improves safety, using facilitators with safeguarding skills and adolescent experience, ensuring understanding of local context and power dynamics, and providing ongoing supervision.

Resource, capacity and feasibility constraints

Choices about M&E methods are shaped by available resources, staff capacity and timeframes. Where resources are limited, prioritisation is essential. Focusing on a smaller number of well-articulated outcomes, selecting methods that directly support learning needs, and planning for realistic analysis can improve overall quality. Practical adaptations include incorporating strategic questions into existing data collection, using short modular tools, and blending digital and offline approaches.

5. Supporting method choice in practice: the Decision-Making Tool

Selecting methods for measuring adolescent girls' empowerment requires balancing what teams want to learn with what is feasible and safe in their context. Country Offices and partners often need to make pragmatic choices based on operating conditions, available resources, safeguarding considerations, and the specific outcomes they are measuring.

To support this process, UNICEF has developed an interactive Decision-Making Tool for adolescent girls' empowerment M&E.

Box 5: How the tool works

The tool guides teams through four steps:

- 1. Select socio-ecological model levels:** Choose whether the programme is working at individual, interpersonal, community, and/or institutional levels
- 2. Describe operating context:** Indicate contextual factors such as cultural restrictiveness and participants' access to technology (e.g. smartphones)
- 3. Specify resources:** Indicate available resources e.g. budget and staff capacity
- 4. Review method options:** The tool generates a shortlist of feasible methods with links to guidance on using the methods in practice



Using the tool effectively

The Decision-Making Tool works best when used early in M&E planning, collaboratively with programme staff and M&E specialists, and alongside other resources in this package. The tool is designed to support decision-making, not replace it. Teams should adapt recommendations based on their specific circumstances and use the tool's outputs as a starting point for further planning and consultation.

6. Good practice recommendations

The following recommendations highlight practices specific to measuring adolescent girls' empowerment, addressing the challenges of measuring change that is non-linear, shaped by power relations, and sensitive to context.

Planning and Learning

Design for non-linear change:

Empowerment outcomes change at different speeds depending on the type of change. For example, girls' knowledge or confidence may shift within months, while social norms or institutional practices often take years ([Jewkes et al., 2008](#)). Teams should plan according to what the best evidence suggests may be a realistic timeframe. Contradictory findings often reveal important insights into whose perspectives are captured and where change is occurring, rather than representing measurement failures.

Create regular moments for adaptive learning

Teams should build structured opportunities (quarterly or biannually) to review data, identify patterns that need explanation, and adjust implementation. This is especially important for empowerment programming because early signals (such as increased reporting of constraints) may look like deterioration but actually indicate increased awareness or trust.

Plan for careful interpretation

Collaborative sense-making sessions to examine and interpret data with girls, implementers, partners and other stakeholders—can be invaluable, but such 'moments' must be deliberately planned and budgeted for.

Methods and Quality

Match methods to age and context

Tools and approaches that work for older adolescents (ages 15-19) often do not work for younger adolescents (ages 10-14). Younger girls are likely to have different circumstances and concerns, different literacy levels, and less experience with abstract concepts ([Mmari et al., 2017](#)). Teams should pilot all tools with the specific age groups being measured.

Triangulate self-reported empowerment with other sources

Data collected directly from girls is critical, but may be insufficient on its own. For example, high self-reported agency can coexist with severe external constraints. Teams should combine what girls say with observation, caregiver perspectives, and institutional data (such as who actually accesses services or leadership roles).

Oversample marginalised groups deliberately

Standard sampling often misses the girls most likely to face constraints: married adolescents, out-of-school girls, girls with disabilities, displaced girls, those in rural or remote areas. Where equity is a programme priority, teams should consider intentionally oversampling these groups to ensure adequate data for analysis. This also requires adapting recruitment, tools, and modes to reach them safely.

Document whose voices are captured - and whose are missing

Teams should track and report who participated in M&E and who could not (or declined). This transparency prevents over-generalising findings and helps identify where additional targeted inquiry is needed.

Inclusion and Participation

Recognise and address power dynamics among girls

Power imbalances exist not just between adults and girls, but among girls themselves (by age, social status, marital status, disability, ethnicity). Participatory approaches should actively manage these dynamics - for example, through separate activities for different age groups or for married versus unmarried girls.

Use peer researchers strategically

Trained adolescent peer researchers can often access information that adults cannot, or bring a different level of understanding to the M&E process. However, their involvement and engagement requires careful selection, training, ongoing supervision, and support. Peer researchers should be compensated appropriately and protected from burden or vicarious trauma.

Adapt timing, location, and format for different groups

Married girls, working girls, and school-going girls have different schedules and mobility. Rural girls may not be able to travel to district centres. Venues and formats should be accessible to girls with disabilities. One-size-fits-all data collection systematically excludes many girls.

Ethics and Safeguarding

Assess household and community dynamics before data collection

M&E approaches need to be fully cognisant that household and/or community dynamics can be complex and highly gendered. Teams should assess who controls girls' mobility and voice, and plan consent/assent processes accordingly.

Manage digital risks specific to adolescent girls

Phones and devices are often shared with or monitored by family members. Girls may not have private access or safe spaces to respond to digital surveys or messages ([GSMA](#), 2020). When using digital methods, teams should provide offline alternatives, keep questions non-sensitive for digital formats, and monitor who is systematically excluded by digital approaches.

Apply responsible practices for AI tools

Where AI tools support M&E (such as transcription or translation), it is important to recognise that AI systems are trained predominantly on data from the Global North and can misinterpret language, context, or meaning from adolescent girls in other settings ([Buolamwini & Gebru](#), 2018). This may lead to unseen and unpredictable biases – processes must be in place to prevent and detect these as much as possible.

For example, teams should review outputs carefully, use approved systems, protect girls' data, and document what was used and how it was checked. Ensuring that a human remains systematically in the loop is the primary concern, alongside documentation and transparency.

7. Using this brief

Practice Brief 2 supports method selection and adaptive M&E design for adolescent girls' empowerment. It works alongside Practice Brief 1 (for outcome and indicator selection) and the Methodology Notes (for specific indicator guidance). The Decision-Making Tool provides structured support for selecting methods based on context, resources, and safeguarding considerations. Teams are encouraged to use these resources together when planning M&E approaches for programmes aiming to empower adolescent girls.

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Wherever he lives.
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A future.
A fair chance.
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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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