

SUMMARY REPORT

THE REALITIES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN KINSHASA: RESEARCH ABOUT GIRLS, BY GIRLS

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LA PÉPINIÈRE
DFID DRC'S PROGRAMME
FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS
AND YOUNG WOMEN



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La Pépinière is a flagship DFID programme focused on adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) aged 12-24 in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The long-term vision of La Pépinière is to improve the situation of women and girls in the DRC through supporting DFID, its partners, other donors and actors to develop policies and programmes which achieve better results for women and girls.

This summary report is part of a full report which will be available on our website (www.sddirect.org.uk) as from June 2016.

Cover: La Pépinière Girl Researchers, Mentors, Girls Engagement Advisor and Logistician at October 2015 Research Analysis Workshop in Kinshasa. Photo by Jessica Jacobson.

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INTRODUCTION

The Realities of Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Kinshasa: Research About Girls, By Girls, the La Pépinière programme's flagship report, aims to **improve understanding of the situation and everyday realities of adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in Kinshasa**. It draws on qualitative research conducted in mid-2015 by a team of 15 Congolese girl researchers recruited, trained and mentored by the *La Pépinière* programme. It focuses on AGYW's experiences, perceptions and aspirations with respect to their economic and social empowerment. The report also draws on analysis conducted of national survey data and wider literature on AGYW in DRC.

The report is written for all government, donors, civil society and private actors whose policies and programmes affect - whether directly or indirectly - the lives of adolescent girls and young women in Kinshasa, and more widely in DRC. It aims to provide evidence to support these stakeholders to ensure that their policies and programmes are developed in line with the priorities expressed by AGYW themselves, and that they address the most important factors that facilitate or impede the empowerment of and positive outcomes for AGYW.

This summary describes the **girl-led approach and methodology** used, and summarises **key findings** around perceptions and norms around AGYW; their economic and social lives; their decision-making power; what empowerment means to them; and their aspirations and dreams for the future. This summary concludes with **key recommendations** for policymakers, practitioners and researchers.



GIRL-LED APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken with girl researchers from the beginning. The study methodology included training and capacity building for the 15 girl researchers, piloting of the in-depth interview guides, four weeks of mentored fieldwork and a participatory process of data analysis. Each girl researcher (all aged 16-24) undertook interviews with younger adolescent girls, with peers of a similar age and with adult men or women that they considered influential in the lives of AGYW in their communities and social networks. **In total, 177 interviews were conducted, 117 with adolescent girls and young women and 60 with influential adults.**

Although the sample was purposive, it included **a diversity of AGYW with different social backgrounds**, including those in education, working, combining the two, or struggling to earn an income; those living with their parents, other family members or in other household situations; and those stigmatised and rejected, for example because they engage in sex work or transactional sex, or are *filles-mères* ('girl-mothers').

The girl researchers were very motivated and experienced a positive transformation in personal and professional capacities during the research. The quality of the data collection was good and the consistency of findings across interviews and with other studies gives confidence in the results.

Girl researchers' testimonies

"I have learned such a lot and I am developing as a person through this research."

"I am curious and I love to learn... I really want to work in science and put this to the service of my society... I want to go far... I have learned how to ask good questions, how to probe... I didn't know how to do this... how to put people at ease."

PERCEPTIONS AND NORMS AROUND ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

The transition from childhood to adulthood for girls tends to be a moment rather than a process, still marked to a large extent, by the onset of puberty. At this point, changes can be rapid and girls can suddenly be expected to bring income into the household and many will receive sexual advances. This contrasts with boys, where the transition to adulthood is generally seen as a gradual process, largely marked by their increasing economic autonomy.

There are high, sometimes conflicting, expectations of adolescent girls and young women - by themselves and the society around them. Many AGYW are preoccupied with protecting their reputation and being '*bien vu*' (well-viewed) in society, being seen as a 'good girl'. It can be stressful for AGYW to navigate the often-contradictory values from Congolese traditions, religious edicts and modern ideas, and AGYW are often closely monitored and harshly judged by many people around them.

Adolescent girls and young women tend to get categorised into one of two binary positions: as 'good girls' or 'bad girls'. According to predominant social norms, '**good girls**' are polite, respectful, 'serious' and *soumise* (submissive) to family and community members. They dress appropriately (i.e. conservatively) and they spend their time productively, being 'useful', in study, working ('decent' work) or praying. They follow their parents' advice, refrain from hanging out with their peers, who might be a 'bad influence', do not frequent boys and do not engage in pre-marital sex. Later, 'good girls' are expected to marry well, be good wives and mothers, but also support their family economically and contribute to society.

If a girl slips up in her behaviour, she can very quickly get a reputation as a 'bad girl'. This might simply be because she dresses in tight clothes, is seen with a boy or speaks her mind. '**Bad girls**' are frequently categorised as impolite, disrespectful and *légère* (easy). It is assumed - whether true or not - that a 'bad girl' is having sexual relationships with many men, is using this to earn money, that she spends her time unproductively, and is 'useless'. If a girl then has a child and becomes a *fille-mère* or is known to have had an abortion (which is common, in this context with limited access to family planning services and contraceptives), then her reputation as a 'bad girl' is cemented and she suffers stigma and exclusion from some social spaces.

The responsibility or blame for (not) meeting these expectations is placed almost entirely on the girl or young woman herself, her character and behaviour. There is a significant gap between these high expectations and realities, and little understanding - often even from AGYW themselves - of why these expectations are so difficult to achieve. There is little recognition of the huge challenges she might face, of how others might abuse or exploit her and of how her surrounding social and economic environment impedes her. There also seems to be no 'plan B' for these girls, and once categorised as a 'bad girl', it seems very difficult to escape this categorisation.

THE ECONOMIC LIVES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

The majority of the adolescent girls and young women interviewed had someone who provided for them, usually giving them shelter and food, sometimes paying school fees or giving 'pocket money'. In most cases, this was their parents (or step-parents), in some cases other family members, and occasionally community members or boyfriends. A minority of girls had no one to support them economically and said that they had to manage themselves.

Many AGYW proactively seek to combine sums of money from different people and often also those they generate through their own economic activities. Most AGYW interviewed were in full-time education. Many were studying only and supported economically by family members, but several girls and young women combined their studies and economic activities to generate income—e.g. through engaging in small trading at school, or during school holidays.

The predominant economic activity is small trading in the informal sector, mainly foodstuffs, and, sometimes, personal items. Around half of the AGYW interviewed engaged in small trading, most often street or market selling or via social networks and at school. Several AGYW receive support for their trading activities, with most relying significantly on their family and social networks—mainly mothers and aunts—for access to clients or markets. The next most significant economic activity of AGYW was hairdressing (braiding). A few AGYW also combine different economic activities, usually the sale of different kinds of goods, either simultaneously, or by season, or combining selling and hairdressing.

There is a significant lack of salaried employment opportunities in the formal sector for girls and young women. A small minority of AGYW had any kind of formal work—these included jobs such as a cashier, a bank teller, and shop assistant. Analysis of secondary data confirms this and suggests that, whilst more boys and young men are in formal employment, this is still a very small proportion of the overall population.

A minority of girls and young women said that they earned income by engaging in sex work or transactional sex. These AGYW appear to engage in this because they have no family or others to give them economic support, or when their own parents expect them to bring money into the household to contribute to household costs. Many AGYW and adult interviewees reported that engagement in sex work or transactional sex to earn an income is more common than our interviewee numbers suggest. However, without a quantitative survey, it is difficult to confirm this or whether their views are simply an expression of prevalent stereotypes about AGYW.

The majority of girls and young women produce a small profit or retain some income, whether from their own economic activities or from saving money received from others. AGYW mostly used this to pay their own school fees, and/or pay for personal items like beauty products and clothing. Many AGYW contributed to their families, for example by buying food for the household, paying their own school fees or for their brothers and sisters.

Some girls and young women save small amounts of money, mainly using the informal savings mechanisms in their neighbourhoods (saving by card or the *likelemba* savings and loans groups system) or via the mobile money services offered by mobile telephone companies (e.g. Tigo cash, Vodacom M-Pesa). Whilst there are some risks of loss of money with these mechanisms, this can help an AGYW manage frequent requests for money from others, such as family members or boyfriends. There are few examples of girls thinking of future investments; many dream about becoming successful businesswomen but have few concrete plans.

Many girls and young women who earn their own money say that it gives them some 'independence' and that they feel 'useful'. Other terms used included 'autonomy', 'dignity' and 'freedom'. These less tangible benefits of economic activities are around how a girl herself feels, but also influence how she is perceived within the household and community.

In both the formal and informal sectors, girls and young women mentioned various risks they were exposed to as a result of their economic activities. For some AGYW, there were constraints placed on them by boyfriends, fiancés or parents, for example around their mobility or whether and how they worked or sold goods. Selling on credit is common in Kinshasa and there are risks of clients not paying. There are also stories of stealing, jealousy and mockery.

A key risk for girls and young women working in both informal and formal employment is sexual harassment and assault. For those who sell goods in public spaces and have to move around for their work, there is an ongoing risk of harassment, ranging from sexual comments and advances to being assaulted or raped. In formal workplaces, women can be bullied, intimidated, asked for sex in return for jobs or promotions and assaulted by managers or employees. Beyond the workplace, there are also risks of sexual exploitation by family members, pressures from boyfriends and older men, and other men who might 'help' AGYW.



THE DECISION-MAKING POWER OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

Whilst most adolescent girls and young women have some decision-making power in some areas of their personal lives, there are areas where they could not decide independently, had to engage in significant negotiations or had no say.

In the domain of education, there appears to be some negotiation between parents / carers and daughters, in terms of decisions about whether to continue studying and/or which subjects to study—if the resources for school fees are available. Some parents or carers will impose decisions; in some cases AGYW work to pay or contribute to school fees.

The majority of AGYW say they can decide themselves what work they do. Most say that they can control their own income, although some say others control their income, mainly their parents or, in one case, a boyfriend. However, there appear to be cases where parents choose or impose choices over work for their daughters, such as asking them to sell certain products.

AGYW generally say that their choice of boyfriend or husband is their own. Nonetheless, none of those interviewed were married and only a few reported having boyfriends. Several AGYW say they would accept advice from family members in choosing the right husband. There are suggestions, however, that some parents use the dowry payment to impose decisions on whom their daughter will marry. By contrast, adolescent boys and young men (ABYM) can decide when they want to get married and are expected to make the marriage proposal.

The majority of girls and young women say that they can make decisions about sex. However, most AGYW say that sex is a risk and that they have decided to choose abstinence before marriage. However, given that sex is such a taboo subject and girls police their reputations around sex, it is difficult to know to what extent AGYW are being open about this. It is clear however that there are often significant social and economic pressures on girls to have sexual relations with boys and men, despite the predominant norms.

Many parents and family members try to exert control over the mobility of AGYW, to control where and with whom they go out, and also to protect them from the risk of sexual violence. AGYW who go out without 'legitimate' reason (i.e. school, work or church) can also be stigmatised, as 'good girls' are expected to stay at home and be watched and protected. By contrast, ABYM do not face constraints to their mobility. ABYM can decide when to leave their parents' house to rent or buy a house or land. Yet, AGYW who leave the parental home before marriage are stigmatised and often assumed prostitutes.

Most adolescent girls and young women say they participate in some decisions within the household, but are rarely able to do this within the larger family, or within the quartier. However, whilst many AGYW seem to be able to express their views on many issues in the household, it seems to only be minor decisions where they have a say, and the wishes of brothers are often prioritised. A critical relationship worthy of further investigation is that between fathers and daughters; several AGYW lamented the fact that they had limited dialogue with their fathers, especially in comparison to their brothers.

AGYW expressed different views on whether they would like to change the way decisions are made. Many AGYW would like to see changes in order to give girls more decision-making power—in general—and also within specific domains, particularly regarding mobility, their studies, and decisions around marriage and sexuality. However, a minority of girls did not want to change the way decisions are made.

THE SOCIAL LIVES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

The majority of adolescent girls and young women say that they spend most of their time with their families, mainly their parents and siblings, but also their cousins, aunts and uncles and grandparents. This includes time at home, working with family members and sometimes in family meetings. Many AGYW say that family members have a positive influence on their lives, giving them ‘good advice’ (with the exception of sex and sexual health, too sensitive to discuss with parents, although often discussed with older sisters and friends), helping them resolve personal problems, and supporting girls with their education and economic activities through advice, encouragement, and, sometimes, financial contributions.

Many AGYW also spend significant time at church praying and participating in choirs, prayer groups and church youth groups. A significant number of AGYW belong to church groups, which appear to be a social space that AGYW can engage in with the approbation of their families and communities. AGYW express mixed views about the role of the church and its members: some talk about the guidance they receive through sermons and one-to-one counsel, hope and friendship, but others mention the constant pressure to contribute financially to the church, and the harsh exclusion of some AGYW, such as sex workers and *filles-mères*.

AGYW also spend time with school and neighbourhood friends of a similar age, mainly girls, most stressing that they only spend time with ‘close friends’ who give ‘good advice’ and that they avoided ‘bad influences’ of other girls—something talked about frequently by AGYW and adults. Some AGYW spend time with young men and boys, as friends and boyfriends, but most were reluctant to talk about this, likely fearing being labelled as a ‘bad girl’ or *légère*.

Many girls and young women are still at school and spend significant time there. Whilst most talk about the positive influence of school as a place of learning and interaction with friends; several AGYW interviewed recounted stories of teachers who asked for money or sex from students, which seems to be a significant problem in Kinshasa.

Nearly all AGYW regularly use at least one media source, and many combine different media for different purposes including for information and entertainment. TV is the main and preferred source, but it is not always clear where girls access TV, and to what extent they can control what programmes they watch. They mainly like to watch soap opera series and Nigerian films. Contrary to assumptions, some AGYW do also listen to the news, especially about events in DRC. Some AGYW also listen to the radio, which is more accessible than TV.

AGYW are quite divided when it comes to access to the Internet and use of social media. Many AGYW say that they do not use the Internet, because they don’t think it is ‘useful’, or they do not have access or because it presents risks. Whilst many AGYW use social media to keep in touch with friends and meet new people—these networks are also seen as risky to AGYW’s safety and reputation. The social media AGYW primarily use are Facebook and WhatsApp.

WHAT EMPOWERMENT MEANS FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

Interpretations of ‘empowerment’ amongst AGYW in Kinshasa are multi-faceted and not necessarily aligned with external definitions. The English word ‘empowerment’ and the French word ‘*autonomisation*’ mean slightly different things and neither translates directly into Lingala. The girl researchers discussed among themselves as well as with interviewees ideas around autonomy, agency, independence, capability and so on, and identified five different terms in Lingala which might be variously used to signify an ‘empowered woman’:

AGYW’s varied understandings of an ‘empowered woman’

Mwasi malonga, a woman valued and respected in society as she has succeeded economically and socially, supports herself and others and conforms with predominant social norms.

Mwasi amikoka, a woman who is capable, independent and self-sufficient economically.

Grande dame, a woman with high status and profile, is capable and is admired and valued.

Mwasi elombe, a capable, ambitious and autonomous woman who is self-sufficient who supports herself and others.

Elombe mwasi, a dynamic, capable and powerful (including physically) woman, but who does not necessarily act in conformity with social norms and is not necessarily praised.

For most AGYW, an ‘empowered woman’ is someone who can support herself and others by her own revenue, is ‘useful’ to society and hence is valued and seen as successful. AGYW interviewed generally used the term *mwasi malonga* or *mwasi elombe*. Most stressed that a woman should not be economically self-sufficient purely for her own personal gain, but is expected to support and invest in her family and those around her. Hence, empowerment is conceived of as for the collective via the individual, and an empowered woman is integrated in society. Some, but not all, AGYW also stressed the importance of a woman conforming to society’s expectations in terms of her behaviour (e.g. being polite, respectful and *soumise*).

Most AGYW said ‘empowered women’ had usually studied, they worked and they were generally, but not necessarily, married. Other characteristics mentioned were wisdom, entrepreneurialism, an ability to express herself and *savoir-vivre*. A few AGYW stressed the empowered woman’s journey—that to succeed she had to work hard and overcome difficulties.

In terms of role models and women who inspire them, AGYW talked about their family members and neighbours, as well as women with a public profile. AGYW commonly mentioned their mothers, aunts and older sisters who they describe as *mwasi malonga* or *mwasi elombe*. AGYW are also often inspired by other women in their quartier, particularly *maman pasteurs* (women pastors), women who help others and women who have significant business activities. AGYW also see role models and empowered women outside of their community, including national and international politicians (and wives of politicians like Olive Kabila) and celebrities—particularly Christian singers and well-known fashion designers.

The majority of girls and young women said that they and other AGYW would become a *mwasi elombe* or *mwasi malonga* primarily through their own efforts. This means finishing their studies, earning and saving money. It also implies a strong character and good behaviour, attributes such as discipline, determination, courage, faith, being 'serious'. Many AGYW also say that they must avoid pregnancy before marriage and protect their reputation. The obstacles to empowerment cited were an AGYW's own character and behaviour and the bad influences of her social group, rather than structural factors in her wider environment.

The circumstances in which marriage can be empowering or disempowering warrant further study. For many AGYW, marriage is a necessary ingredient to become a *mwasi malonga*. Some AGYW also think that their future husbands could help them with economic activities, giving them start up capital and advice. However, some AGYW talked about some husbands constraining their wives, stopping them from working or limiting their mobility.

THE ASPIRATIONS OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

The majority of girls and young women aspire to become respected, well known, and valued in their communities, to become *'mwasi malonga'*. The majority of AGYW have aspirations to work and to also marry and have a family, implying they felt that it was possible to balance all three. Only a minority of AGYW said that they do not want to work, and aspire to marriage alone, and these were all above 20 years of age.

In terms of work aspirations, the majority of girls are ambitious. Some girls simply aspire to find a 'good job' and be 'useful', but the majority aspire to particular professions, to become a doctor, businesswoman, lawyer, seamstress or journalist. Many AGYW have work aspirations linked to their desires to help others. A few AGYW spoke in general terms about becoming rich, becoming famous and becoming a *'grande dame'*, who is powerful, wealthy, able to travel, well-known and respected in the community.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS, PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS

This report is written for all government, donor, civil society and private actors whose policies, programmes and research affect, whether directly or indirectly, the lives of adolescent girls and young women in Kinshasa, and more widely in DRC. Some key recommendations:

Ensure an inclusive and participatory approach. AGYW interventions should be inclusive, understanding the range of experiences of different AGYW, and that whilst some experiences cut across lines such as age and class, others are particular to certain groups, such as *filles-mères*. Any practitioner, policymaker or researcher must bear in mind these differences in order to establish inclusive programmes, policies and research, including through ensuring that M&E data are disaggregated by key factors such as socio-economic states.

The experiences of La Pépinière in setting up the Girl-Led Research Unit (GLRU) clearly shows the value of including AGYW in the development and implementation of quality, locally-relevant research, and calls for further inclusion in the implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes. It is recommended that practitioners, policymakers and researchers build on this experience to include AGYW in their planning and ensure they have a voice in research about them and decisions made on their behalf. In similar vein, interventions should **nurture AGYW's own aspirations for empowerment and align programmes with these.**

This study demonstrates the need for a non-discriminatory policy environment that will support the needs and aspirations of specific groups of AGYW for economic empowerment through developing **a more equitable family code**; establishing **safe, protected educational and working environments**; and access to **regulated financial services**.

Interventions to economically empower AGYW should take a holistic approach, combining work with individual AGYW themselves to build their social, economic and psychological assets and resources, with work that ensures the individuals and institutions in their wider environment support and facilitate their empowerment (e.g. through shifting social norms around the status and value of AGYW). Priority interventions include: **supporting individual AGYW** to build business and entrepreneurship skills, improved loans and savings mechanisms, and improved sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services; fostering **positive relationships within and outside the family**, through encouraging family dialogue and supportive familial relationships, and through developing safe social spaces for AGYW outside the home; and **developing a supportive environment for AGYW empowerment**, through campaigns that portray more realistic and varied images of AGYW, and working with the institutions (e.g. formal and informal education, religious institutions) with which AGYW engage, to ensure they are supportive, inclusive and safe.

This study has given important insights into the realities of adolescent girls and young women, but it has also inevitably identified a number of areas where follow up research would be useful. In all cases it is recommended that AGYW participate in the design of the research, and in many cases AGYW could play a key role on the research team. Key areas identified for further research include gaining a better understanding of: intra-household dynamics; AGYW's trade networks; AGYW's participation in the formal sector; AGYW's participation in sex work and transactional sex; the dynamics of sexual violence; the role of marriage in AGYW's economic empowerment; and the potential to improve AGYW's empowerment through schools.



