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A Conceptual Model of

WOMEN AND GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT

BILL & MELINDA GATES *foundation*

Why develop a model of women and girls' empowerment?



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At the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we believe that all lives have equal value and that everyone has the right to live a healthy and productive life. Throughout our 16 years of focusing on global health and development, we have been committed to reaching poor and marginalized communities. In recent years, we have begun to focus more intentionally on addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality, particularly as experienced by women and girls.

The world has seen progress toward greater gender equality in recent decades, but the pace of change has been uneven and vast inequalities persist. Significant barriers still stand in the way of women and girls' ability to thrive. Worldwide, 15 million girls under age 18 are married each year.[1] At least one in three women experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetimes.[2] In some countries, girls are still less likely to complete secondary school than boys.[3] Women and girls are underrepresented in economic and political decision-making, face barriers to equal participation in the formal economy, earn less, and have unequal access to assets and property.[4,5] They are also 14% less likely to own a cell phone than men, and 1.1 billion women remain outside the formal financial system.[6,7] For millions of women, the day they give birth is one of the most dangerous days of their lives. Inequalities persist within all sectors and spheres, but with considerable variation within and between countries. The disadvantages and inequality that women and girls experience often stem from lack of control over their own lives and futures and are rooted in unequal gender relations of power.

We believe that when women and girls are empowered to live to their full potential, *everyone* benefits exponentially.

The barriers to equality are deeply ingrained and complex. Overcoming them will not be easy. However, we believe that when women and girls are empowered to live to their full potential, *everyone* benefits exponentially. At the foundation, we are confident that our efforts to improve the health and well-being of those most in need will become much more achievable when we put the empowerment of women and girls at the heart of our work. As Melinda Gates wrote in 2014, "We will not use the complexity of resolving gender inequality as an excuse for failing to think and act more intentionally about putting women and girls at the center of what we do."[8]

Melinda's call to action inspired the foundation to develop a clearly defined model of women and girls' empowerment. We recognized a need to clarify what we mean by empowerment in order to set strategic goals, make investments with partners, and measure progress.

1. UNICEF. *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects*. New York: UNICEF, 2014.
2. The website of the World Health Organization. "Violence Against Women." Updated 2016. http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/
3. World Economic Forum. *The Global Gender Gap Report 2016*. Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2016. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR16/WEF_Global_Gender_Gap_Report_2016.pdf
4. Ibid.
5. The website of UN Women: Progress of the World's Women, 2015 – 2016. http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/
6. GSMA Connected Women. *Bridging the Gender Gap: Mobile Access and Usage in Low- and Middle-Income Countries*. 2015.
7. Demirgüç-Kunt, Asli, et al. *The Global Findex Database 2014: Measuring Financial Inclusion Around the World*. World Bank Group, 2015.
8. Gates, Melinda. "Putting Women and Girls at the Center of Development." *Science* 12 (2014): 345. doi: 10.1126/science.1258882.

Our Motivations and Approach

The foundation has three main motivations for taking an intentional approach to investing in the empowerment of women and girls:

- Our mission and core values are aligned with investing in the empowerment of women and girls to achieve **greater gender equality as an end in itself**. As Melinda wrote in the 2017 Annual Letter from the foundation co-chairs, "For us, 'All lives have equal value' is not just a principle; it's a strategy. You can create all kinds of new tools, but if you're not moving toward equality, you're not really changing the world. You're just rearranging it."
- We believe that investing in the empowerment of women and girls can lead to **better health and development outcomes**. A large and growing body of evidence shows that empowered women and girls acting as agents of change in their communities can and do bring about better health and development outcomes for all.[9]
- We recognize the importance of intentionally focusing on power relations and inequality in the contexts in which we work to **avoid harmful unintended consequences**. If we do not seek to understand and address power imbalances and inequality, we risk reinforcing them.

We have also come to recognize that many programs that aim to benefit women and girls do not ultimately empower them, and may in fact reinforce their lack of power. A focus on empowerment requires a shift away from seeing women and girls as beneficiaries of health and development programs to viewing them as agents of change for their own individual and collective empowerment. Beyond providing resources or benefits, programs that aim to empower women and girls must involve a process of social transformation, ultimately enhancing the control that women and girls have over their own lives.

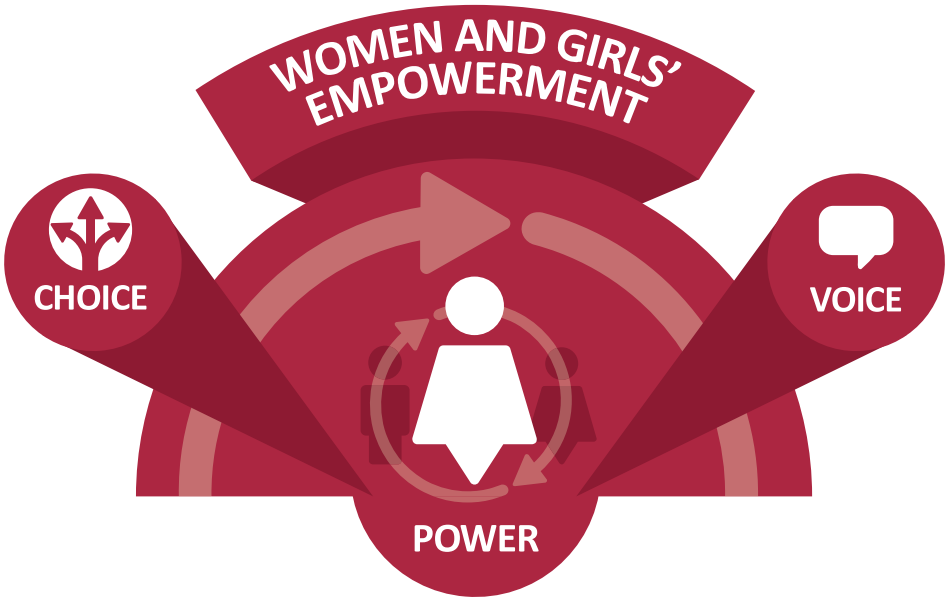
The aim in developing this model is not to reinvent the concept of women and girls' empowerment, but rather to draw on decades of thought, program work, evidence, and learning by academics, activists, implementers, and women and girls in the communities in which we work. Many of our partners have been applying these concepts in their own work for a long time, with great success, as well as learning lessons along the way. As an organization, we want to ensure that we approach our work on women and girls' empowerment with clarity and consistency. We would do ourselves, our partners, and the women and girls with whom we engage a huge disservice if we did not carefully consider this concept in all its complexity.

A focus on empowerment requires a shift away from seeing women and girls as beneficiaries of health and development programs to viewing them as agents of change for their own individual and collective empowerment.

This brief presents the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's model of women and girls' empowerment, which was developed in partnership with the Gender Team at the Royal Tropical Institute of the Netherlands (KIT), based in Amsterdam. The model was designed using a process that involved an extensive literature review, alongside consultations with foundation staff, partners, and experts to ensure its relevance to our core values and work. This brief synthesizes findings from a background whitepaper of the same title.[10] It also reviews the practical implications of using this model to inform our work moving forward.

9. Taukobong, H. F., et al., "Does Addressing Gender Inequalities and Empowering Women and Girls Improve Health and Development Programme Outcomes?" *Health Policy and Planning* 31 (2016): 1492–1514.
10. See the whitepaper for the full citations of the many publications and resources utilized as the basis for this model.

Defining Empowerment: Choice, Voice, and Power



We define empowerment 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 women and girls expand their aspirations, strengthen their voice, and exercise more choice. A woman or girl can experience empowerment in varying degrees and across different areas of her life—in her home, her family, her workplace, and her community. Empowerment is also an **outcome** of women and girls having greater influence and control over their own lives and futures.

When a woman or girl's **choices** expand, an array of opportunities open up to her, many of which she may never have previously imagined. Expansion of choice is particularly important for strategic life choices that greatly affect her current conditions and future opportunities—such as when and whom to marry, whether to have children and how many, where she will live, her friends and network, and her livelihood. The desired outcome is increased freedom for her to make informed and voluntary choices based on her own preferences.

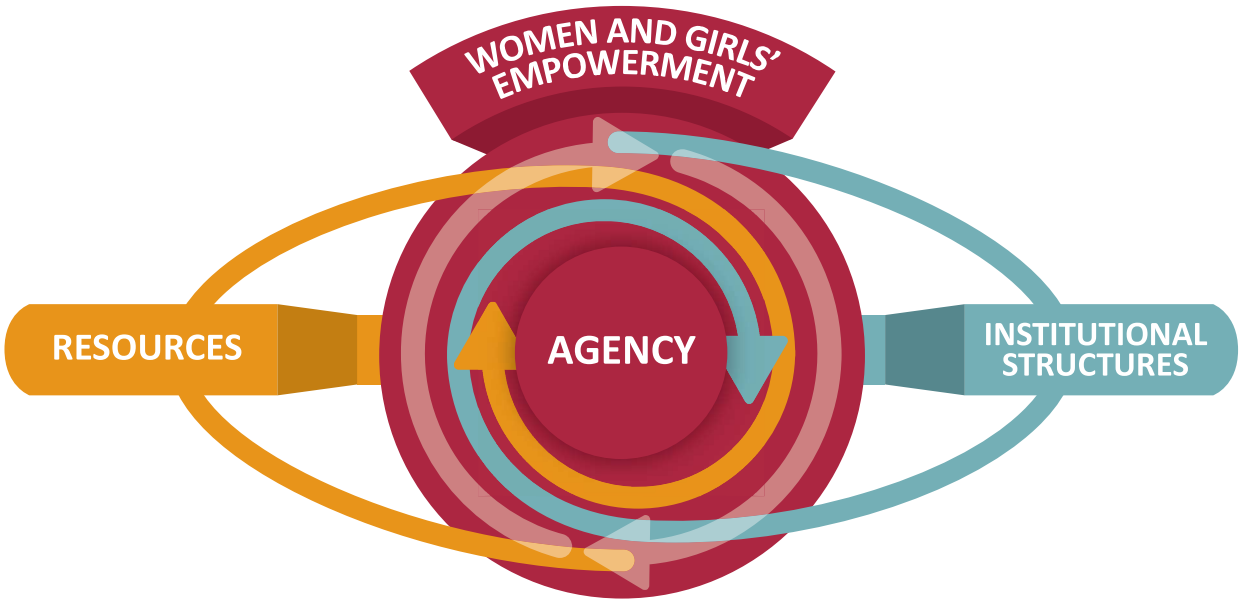
When a woman or girl's **voice** strengthens, she is able to speak up and be heard in discussions and decisions that shape her life and future in both public and private settings. Voice can be strengthened through greater participation and representation of women in political and economic decision-making and through collective organizing, in which women and girls express their interests and concerns and create social and institutional change. Through strengthened voice in her household, a woman or girl may gain greater influence and control over key decisions that affect her life and the lives of those around her. Interventions that aim to facilitate women and girls' empowerment must be shaped by the voices of women and girls themselves, and the ultimate goals should be defined by them and reflect their experiences and priorities.

Expansion of choice and strengthening of voice entail a transformation of unequal **power** relations. Unequal gender power relations characterize patriarchal societies—social systems in which men hold primary power in political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property and other resources. Power relations shape disempowerment and the disadvantages experienced by women and girls, as well as their opportunities and well-being. This model views power not just as *power over* women and girls by men and others in authority, but also as:

- **Power to**—a woman or girl's ability to make decisions and act on them
- **Power within**—a woman or girl's sense of self-esteem, dignity, and self-worth
- **Power with**—a woman or girls' strength gained from solidarity, collective action, or mutual support

Transformation of power relations occurs when women and girls exercise **agency** and take action, through expanded access to and control over **resources** and changes to the **institutional structures** that ultimately shape their lives and futures. Agency, institutional structures, and resources are the key elements in our model of women and girls' empowerment.

Key Elements of Empowerment



Agency is at the heart of our model of empowerment; it refers to the capacity of women and girls to take purposeful action and pursue goals, free from the threat of violence or retribution. The three core expressions of agency are decision-making, leadership, and collective action. These are not simply ingredients for agency; rather, they are ways that women and girls can exercise agency in their lives.

Institutional structures are the social arrangements, including both formal and informal rules and practices, that shape and influence women and girls' ability to express agency and assert control over resources. Institutional structures can be found in the spheres of the family, community, market, and state. They comprise formal laws and policies as well as norms that shape relations among individuals and social groups.

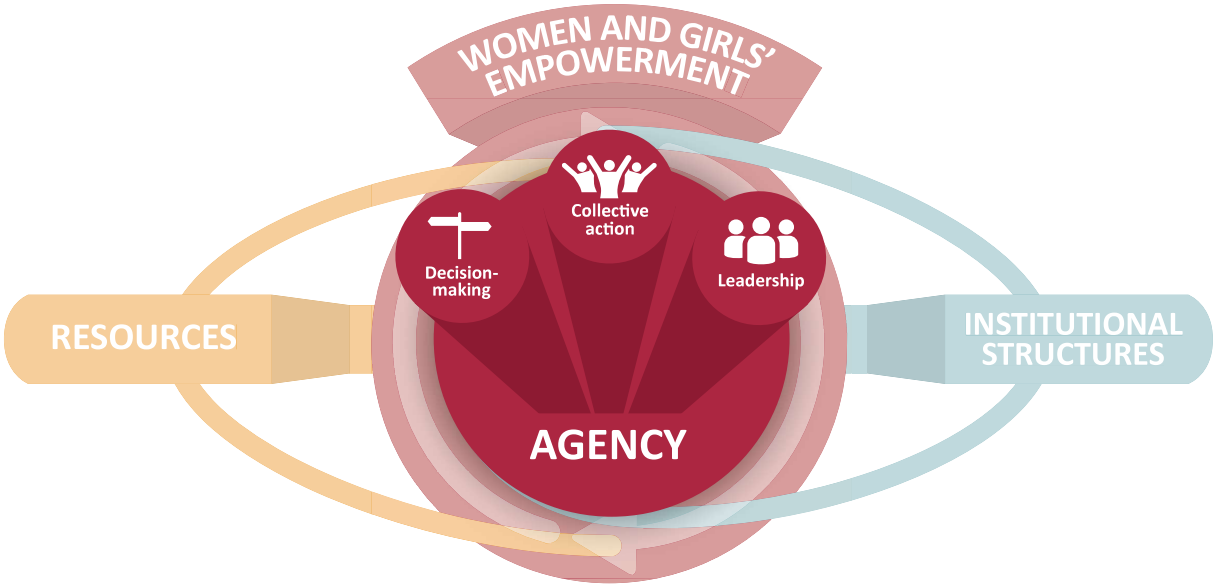
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Resources are tangible and intangible capital and sources of power that women and girls have, own, or use individually or collectively in exercising agency. The key resources highlighted in our model include women and girls' bodily integrity (health, safety, and security), critical consciousness, and assets (financial and productive assets, knowledge and skills, time, and social capital).

Each of these elements and their dimensions are interrelated and can be mutually reinforcing, offering entry points for interventions when addressed explicitly and intentionally.

Agency

Women and girls express agency in **decision-making** when they influence and make decisions and when they establish and act on goals. Key decisions that affect women and girls' lives and futures occur in both the private and public spheres and often entail a process that includes negotiation and compromise. A woman or girl exercises empowered decision-making when she uses her voice to influence key decisions and is aware of, and can act upon, a full array of choices. For example, in the foundation's work on family planning, we seek to increase access to high-quality contraceptive information, services, and supplies to ultimately expand the range of options available to women as they safeguard their health and determine their futures. One woman may decide to have many children, while another may decide to have few or none; empowerment lies in her ability to make the decisions based on her own preferences.



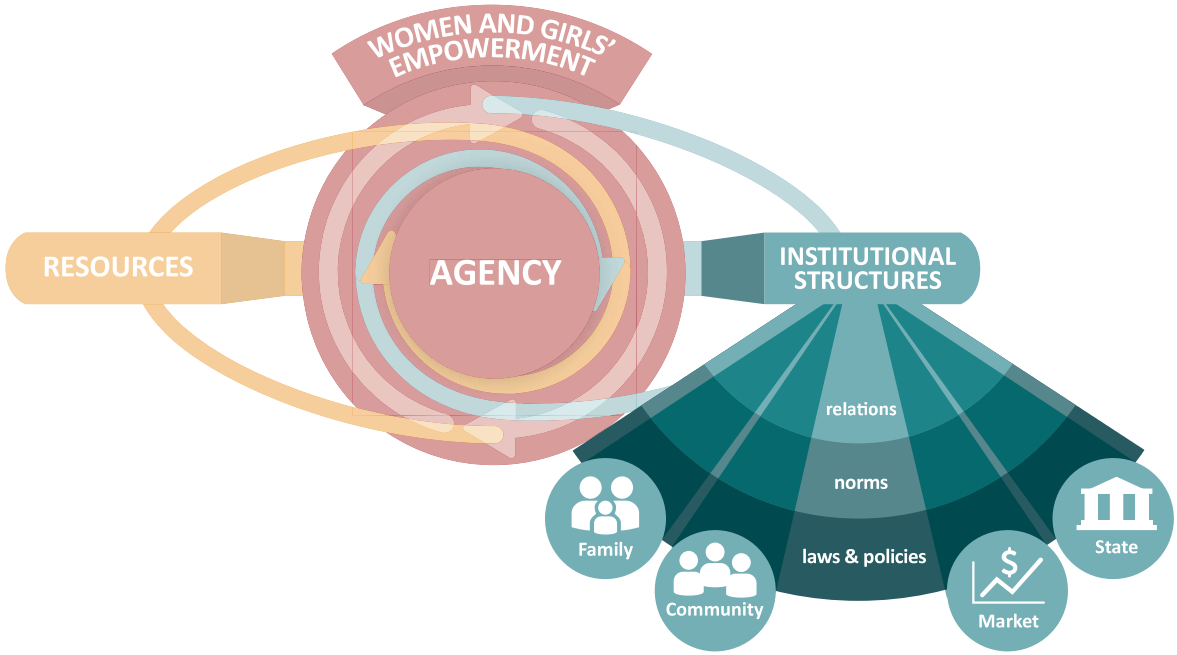
Leadership can be a powerful expression of agency when women and girls lead and inspire social change and effectively participate in governance to improve the status of other women and girls as well as themselves. Women's increased participation in leadership is positively associated with a multitude of benefits for society as a whole. Research shows that a higher percentage of women in legislatures is associated with more positive perceptions of government legitimacy among both men and women; more women serving on boards correlates with higher corporate profits; and women who participate in peace processes are more likely to raise issues that are fundamental to long-term peace and security, such as human rights, justice, security, employment, and health care.[11]

Women and girls engage in **collective action** when they stand together in solidarity and exercise voice to transform institutions and power relations. Collective action is a powerful tool for social transformation and is fundamental to women and girls' empowerment on a societal level. For example, research has shown that one of the most important and consistent influences on policy change to address violence against women is feminist activism.[12] Many factors can contribute to a woman's ability to participate in collective action, including social capital through her network and her ability to move safely and freely throughout her community. The foundation has worked with partners in Africa and South Asia to support the organization of women's self-help groups and village savings and loans associations, which can provide a platform for women not only to gain access to credit, but also to share information, build social networks, and engage in collective action in their communities. Research has shown that being part of a self-help group can positively affect women's economic, social, and political empowerment.[13]

Institutional Structures

Our model locates institutional structures within four spheres in which women and girls live their lives: the family, community, market, and state. The **family** comprises family members living in the same household as a woman or girl as well as her extended family and wider kinship networks. The **community** includes her neighborhood and her village, town, or city and can include an array of social groups and organizations, such as nongovernmental organizations, community-based organizations, religious institutions, political parties, and advocacy groups. The choices and voice of women and girls can also be influenced by the **state**, which includes governments and the public sector at multiple levels and the institutions they control, such as the military, judicial systems, and public services. The **market** is the economic sphere in which women and girls participate. It consists of businesses and sites of production and trade on the local,

11. Clinton Foundation. *No Ceilings: The Full Participation Report*. New York: Clinton Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Economist Intelligence Unit, and WORLD Policy Analysis Center, 2015.
12. Weldon, S. Laurel, and Mala Htun. "Feminist Mobilisation and Progressive Policy Change: Why Governments Take Action to Combat Violence Against Women." *Gender & Development* 21, no. 2 (2013): 231–47, doi: 10.1080/13552074.2013.802158.
13. Brody, Carinne, et al. *Economic Self-Help Group Programs for Improving Women's Empowerment*. Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2015. doi: 10.4073/csr.2015.19.



national, and international levels, including the labor market. Within each of these spheres, institutional arrangements are shaped by formal laws and policies, norms, and relations among groups and individuals.

Laws and policies established by international treaties and conventions, national governments, and local governments and authorities can affect whether and under what conditions women and girls have access to resources and opportunities. They can affect at what age a woman or girl can be married, whom she can marry, and the conditions under which she can leave a marriage. They can also determine whether she can inherit land, or to what extent she has access to services such as education and health care.

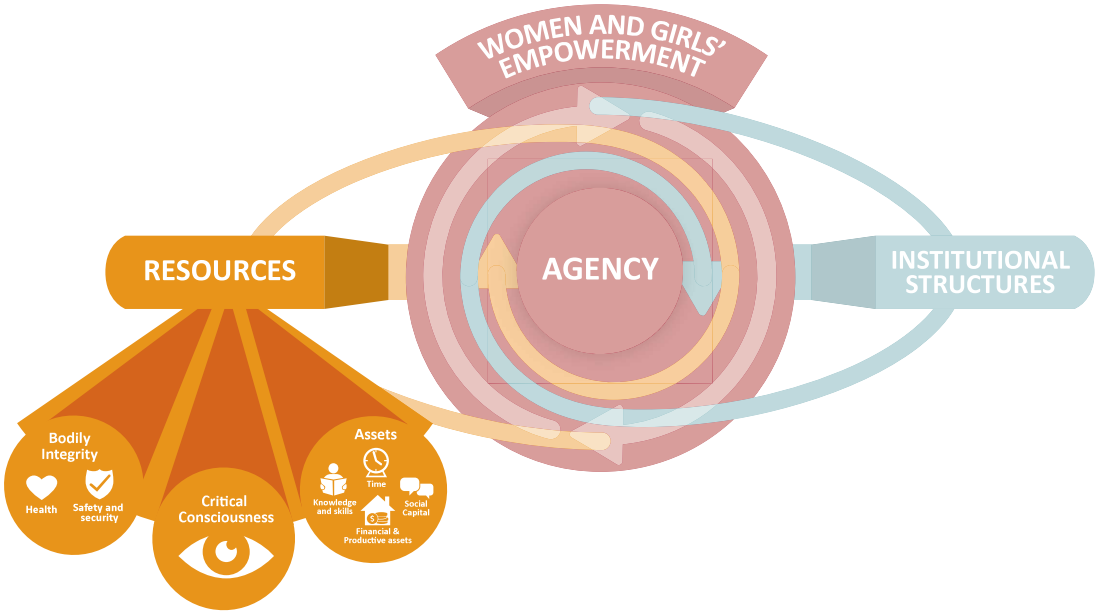
Norms can reinforce or contradict formal laws and policies, and they affect the empowerment of women and girls in complex and nuanced ways. Gender norms are the collectively held expectations and beliefs about how women, men, girls, and boys should behave and interact in specific social settings and during different stages of their lives. If a woman or girl challenges or does not conform to a norm, the consequences for her can range from subtle social exclusion to threats or acts of violence or, in extreme cases, even death.

These formal and informal rules established through laws, policies and norms are shaped and applied in the day-to-day **relations** and interactions that women and girls have with the people in their lives. Partners, relatives, peers, service providers, government authorities, and others can all influence the empowerment of women and girls in positive or negative ways.

Resources

Bodily integrity entails a woman or girl having control over her physical and mental well-being. A healthy and safe body is a necessary basis for women and girls to participate in society and is fundamental to human dignity and freedom. **Health**, and in particular the health of women and girls, has long been a core focus of the foundation's work. Bodily integrity goes beyond having access to quality physical and mental health care to include a woman or girl's ability to make informed choices about her body and health unconstrained by institutional barriers, such as discrimination by health care providers or restrictions on health care choices by her partner or other household members. **Safety and security** enable women and girls to live their lives free from acts or threats of violence or coercion. Even women and girls who do not directly experience violence are affected by the prevalence of violence in their communities and the perceived threat. For example, in cities around the world girls have reported barriers to moving freely throughout their communities, due to restrictions placed on them by family members or their own fear of violence in public spaces.[14] Constraints on mobility can inhibit a woman or girl's ability to develop social networks, her sense of self-worth, and her ability to control other resources that affect her empowerment.

14. UN-Habitat, Plan International, and Women in Cities International. *Adolescent Girls' Views on Safety in Cities: Findings from the Because I Am a Girl Urban Programme Study in Cairo, Delhi, Hanoi, Kampala and Lima. UN-Habitat*, Plan International, and Women in Cities International, 2013.



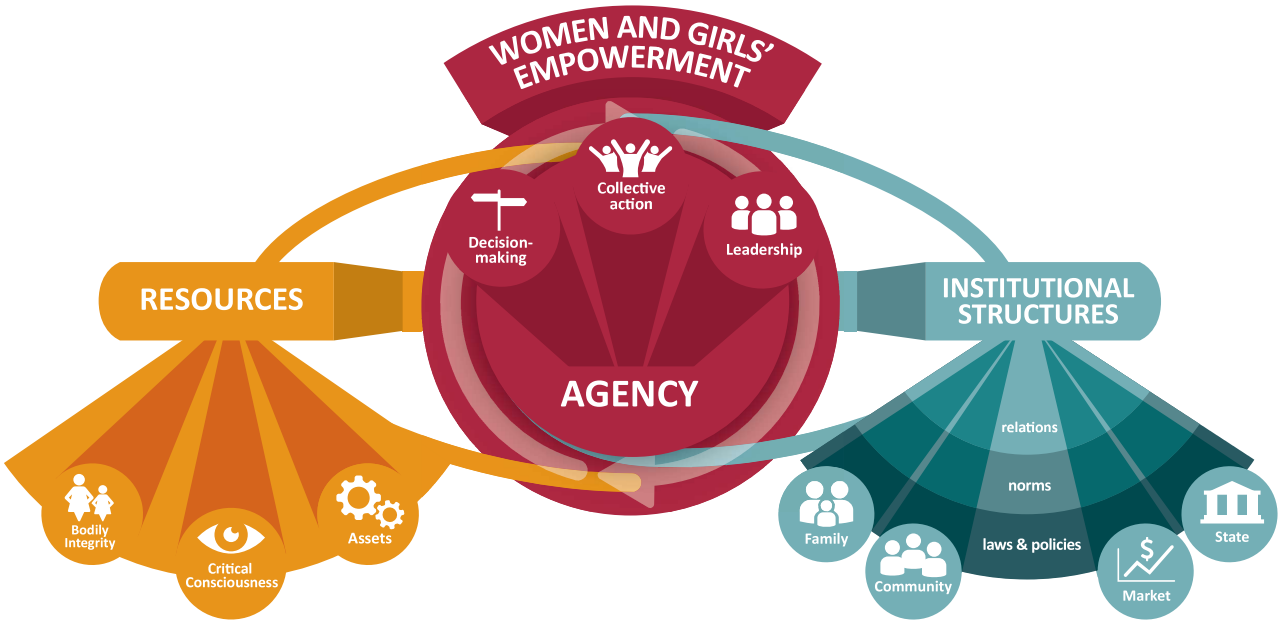
Women and girls gain **critical consciousness** when they identify and question how inequalities and power operate in their lives and affirm their sense of self and their rights. As a woman or girl gains critical consciousness, her "power within" is transformed and her aspirations and sense of self-awareness, confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy grow. It is this internal change that enables her to exercise agency. The development of collective critical consciousness among women and girls can also be a strong driver of collective action and social movements that challenge and transform critical issues of gender discrimination. Research has shown that the transformative effects of empowerment initiatives can be intensified by actively engaging women in consciousness raising.[15]

Assets include both tangible and intangible economic, social, or productive resources, which can constrain or enable women and girls' empowerment. Access to and control over **financial and productive assets** can provide pathways out of poverty for women and girls, in addition to helping them endure shocks such as natural disasters, serious illness, or loss of household income. **Knowledge and skills** are fundamental to women and girls' ability to make informed choices and effectively exercise voice and agency in the empowerment process. A large body of evidence shows a correlation between girls' education and a range of health and development outcomes, including delays in marriage, reduced risk of HIV infection, and increased employment and economic growth.[16,17] Beyond formal education, vocational training, mentorship, and other forms of formal and informal education can be important avenues for women and girls to gain knowledge and skills that enable their empowerment.

In many contexts, women and girls lack control over how they spend their **time**, particularly on unpaid work such as household chores and care of children, the elderly, or sick and dying family members. On average, women and girls across the globe spend more than twice as much time on unpaid care and domestic work as men do, which contributes to their time poverty.[18] The amount of time spent on such work varies greatly by country and context, with wider gaps between men and women in many lower-income countries. However, in almost all contexts such work remains invisible and socially and economically undervalued. When a woman or girl gains more control over her time, opportunities are unlocked, such as time to invest in her education, skill building, paid work, leisure, and building and maintaining friendships and social networks. Women and girls gain **social capital** when they build relationships and social networks that can provide tangible and intangible value and support. Strong networks provide solidarity and can contribute to strengthening critical consciousness. They are also fundamental to women and girls exercising leadership and participating in collective action.

15. Cornwall, Andrea. "Women's Empowerment: What Works?" *Journal of International Development* 28, no. 3 (2016): 342–59.
16. UNESCO. *Gender Summary: Teaching and Learning – Achieving Quality for All.* Paris: UNESCO, 2014.
17. Hunt, Abigail, and Emma Samman. *Women's Economic Empowerment: Navigating Enablers and Constraints.* London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016.
18. Ibid.

Dynamics of Transformative Change



Women and girls experience empowerment when their inner change connects with shifts in institutional structures and systems, resulting in the transformation of power relations at both the individual and societal levels. The multifaceted pathway to social change through empowerment is well articulated by feminist activist and scholar bell hooks, who wrote, "There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures."[19]

Changes in the multiple dimensions of agency, institutional structures, and resources can be mutually reinforcing. For example, women who participate in collective action and successfully change discriminatory inheritance laws may unlock access to productive resources and gain greater power and influence within their households. Conversely, constraints in one dimension can act as a barrier to the overall process of empowerment. For example, efforts to increase a woman's decision-making power within her household may be unsuccessful if norms in her community perpetuate the expectation for women to not speak up in their own homes.

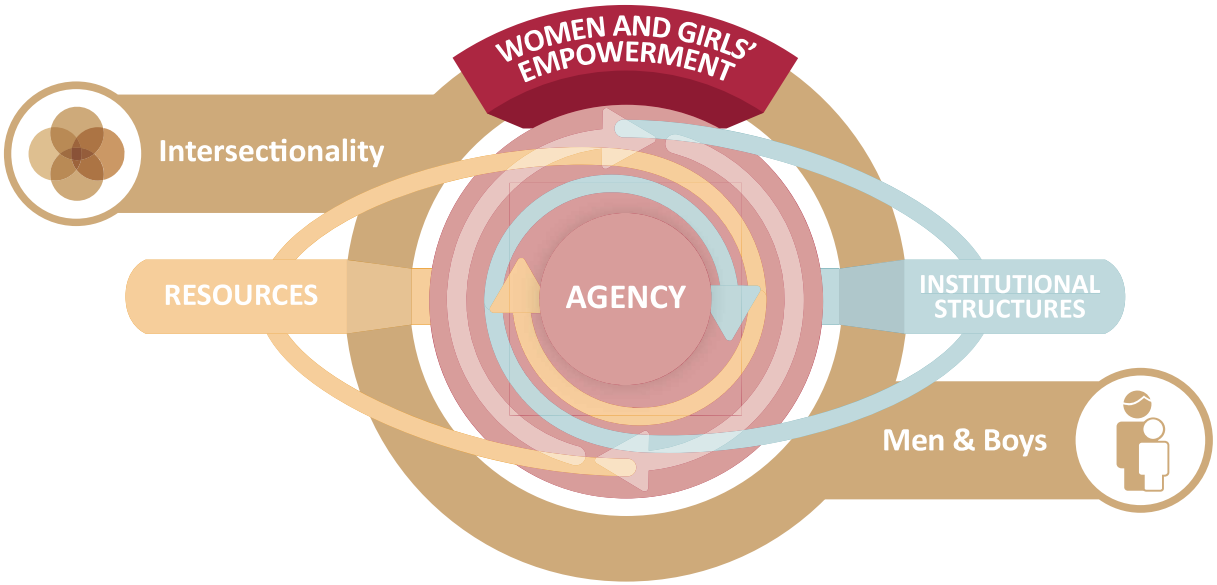
Pathways and constraints to women and girls' empowerment are context specific, and the process is rarely linear. Therefore, interventions aimed at enabling women and girls' empowerment should use a flexible approach and include regular testing of assumptions and course corrections. Social change can often result in backlash, so it is also important to monitor for unintended negative consequences.

"There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures."

—bell hooks

19. hooks, bell. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995.

Crosscutting Considerations



The advantages or disadvantages that a woman or girl faces depend on how gender intersects with her age, class, race, ethnicity, caste, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other social markers of difference. Focusing on gender alone can mask disparities in the conditions and relative empowerment of women and girls within and across contexts. Therefore, using an **intersectional** lens that considers gender and the multiple aspects of identity and status is crucial to understanding a woman or girl's relative empowerment or disempowerment. For example, girls living in poor households are almost twice as likely to marry before age 18 as girls from higher-income homes. Globally, almost 75% of out-of-school girls are ethnic minorities in their countries.[20] Within any given context, women and girls face diverse challenges and advantages and therefore have different barriers and opportunities in terms of exercising choice and voice and shifting power relations.

Men and boys can be critical contributors or barriers to the empowerment of women and girls. Men's attitudes and actions matter, given the key roles they play as fathers, partners, peers, and community leaders within the private and public spheres of women and girls' lives. For example, in a recent study in Bihar, India, 44% of women who had recently given birth reported that their husbands controlled key aspects of their behavior, which would presumably include important decisions affecting the health and well-being of the women and their families, such as whether to give birth in a facility, when and whether to bring an infant in for check-ups, or whether to use contraceptives.[21] Any effort to address the empowerment of women and girls must take into consideration the role of men and boys and ensure that women and girls are equipped to negotiate their relationships with men and boys as power relations shift.

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These two crosscutting considerations are central to how women and girls experience empowerment or disempowerment and are critical to how we understand the entire model of empowerment.

20. Klugman, Jeni, et al. *Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, 2014. doi: 10.1596/978-1-4648-0359-8.
21. Borkum, Evan et. al. *Midline Findings from the Evaluation of the Ananya Program in Bihar*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, 2014.

Moving Forward

This model of women and girls' empowerment is not intended to be a prescriptive guide. Rather, it is a tool that can help identify the multifaceted barriers that women and girls face in their journeys toward empowerment. So, how do we envision using this model of empowerment? It can inform program design so that we are better equipped to understand where the opportunities or constraints lie in advancing the empowerment of women and girls. It can also be the foundational basis of strategy and policy work on gender equality. And, practically, it can challenge us to consider the implications for how we invest in, and develop partnerships for, gender equality work in development.

We have already begun to apply this model in some parts of our work, and we see great potential for the model to:

- Help us consider our role in expanding the array of life **choices** available to women and girls in some of the most resource-constrained contexts around the world
- Ensure that women and girls' **voices** are heard—and prioritized—in shaping the programs and policies that affect their lives
- Anticipate and monitor both positive and negative unintended consequences that may arise from challenging existing **power** structures and relations
- Challenge ourselves toward a more holistic understanding of how gender **intersects** with age, ethnicity, class, caste, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other social markers, recognizing that the most marginalized may face very different barriers to empowerment than relatively more privileged women and girls
- Highlight the role that **men and boys** can play in social transformation and identify ways to catalyze change with their engagement
- Inform program design to be **flexible and adaptable** to changing conditions on the ground and the often nonlinear pathways to empowerment
- **Measure** progress in our programs so we can capture the dynamics of change across different elements of the model

We are energized and inspired to bring this empowerment model to life in our work on gender equality at the foundation. We see some immediate steps for taking this work forward:

Within the Gates Foundation, we are using this model to inform our work in several ways. We are currently developing our first strategy on Gender Equality. This model of empowerment is informing that process, as a lens through which to understand the current state of women and girls' empowerment and disempowerment in different contexts, as well as to explore the role our foundation could play in addressing the constraints that women and girls face in exercising agency, gaining resources, and navigating institutional structures. We also see great potential to apply the empowerment model within our existing efforts to mainstream a gender lens within our core program strategies.

With our partners, we are using this model to inform our approach to learning and evidence within current and future grants that focus on empowerment. In partnership with the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), we are managing a learning agenda across almost 40 projects, many of which were funded through the Women and Girls at the Center of Development Grand Challenge. We are using the model to frame the analysis and synthesize the evidence so that, together with partners, we can better understand women and girls' empowerment as it relates to health and development outcomes. Moving forward, we will use this model to help us target investments in women and girls' empowerment and to inform grant design, measurement, and evaluation.

In the broader field, we hope this model of empowerment is a useful resource for donors, implementers, researchers, and others who strive to contribute to gender equality through the empowerment of women and girls. We are currently supporting the development of guidance on how to better measure women and girls' empowerment, using this model as an organizing framework. Measuring a concept as complex and multi-faceted as empowerment is challenging. But experience has shown that what gets measured matters, and that if we are truly dedicated to prioritizing women and girls' empowerment, we need to commit to thoughtful and nuanced measurement. We are excited to advance our own thinking on measuring empowerment and contribute this guidance to the field as a global public good.

The barriers to equality are deeply ingrained, and overcoming them will not be easy. However, if we succeed, we will all benefit exponentially. Women and girls' empowerment across the globe is a key to challenging these inequalities. Having a clear and holistic understanding of empowerment is necessary for removing the barriers to women and girls thriving and to unlocking the potential of half the world.

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