

Empowerment of girls to be agents of change: qualitative research on young adolescent girls in their role as Girls Right Defender

In the context of the Netherlands, Georgia and Sierra Leone

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Summary

Although there have been several milestones in achieving girls rights, girls still remain to be the largest group in the world excluded from their rights. Millions of girls are disadvantaged in health, education, work and family life. In order to defend, promote and protect the rights of girls several civil society actors are trying to contribute to the compliance of their rights. One important actor of civil society are (child) human rights defenders, which includes girls who are taking action to promote their rights themselves. However, the space of civil society is shrinking which not only limits the civic engagement of child human right defenders but can also violate their rights and cause unsafe situations. Therefore, the aim of this research was to examine if and how girls who are defending for their rights experience the shrinking space for civil society within their activities and which factors of empowerment can be influenced for the girls to be or to get (more) empowered. The results show that the girls experience the ability to agency. However, they do not always experience accessibility to these aspects of agency. The girls' rights defenders sometimes face difficulties in making decisions, expressing their opinions because some norms on societal level within Georgia and Sierra Leone are oppressing the freedom of decision-making and the freedom of expression. This affects their resource of bodily integrity, because it makes them feel unsafe in their activities. Therefore, in conclusion it seems that decision making, bodily integrity, and norms as characteristics of agency, resources and institutional structures can be and should be influenced in order for the girls' rights defenders to be empowered.

Samenvatting

Ondanks meerdere mijlpalen in het bevorderen van meisjesrechten blijven meisjes wereldwijd de grootst uitgesloten groep van hen rechten. Miljoenen meisjes worden benadeeld in gezondheidszorg, onderwijs, carrière en binnen de familie. Om de rechten van deze meisjes te bevorderen, te beschermen en te claimen zijn er verschillende maatschappelijk actoren actief die willen bijdragen aan de naleving van meisjesrechten. Hiervan zijn mensenrechtenverdedigers een hele belangrijk, waarbij meisjes die zelf actief voor hun rechten opkomen ook als kindermensenrechtenverdediger worden gezien. Maar de ruimte voor maatschappelijke actoren wordt minder waardoor niet alleen de maatschappelijke betrokkenheid van mensenrechtenverdedigers ingeperkt wordt maar wat ook kan leiden tot rechtenschendingen en onveilige situaties. Daarom was het doel van deze studie om te onderzoeken of en hoe meisjes die opkomen voor hun rechten deze beperking in maatschappelijke ruimte ervaren en welke factoren van empowerment beïnvloed kunnen worden om de meiden (nog meer) in hun kracht te zetten. De resultaten laten zien dat meiden die opkomen voor hun rechten beschikken over agency maar niet altijd toegang hebben tot de onderdelen van agency. Specifiek in Georgië en Sierra Leone durven deze meiden vanwege de sociale normen in de maatschappij waarin zij leven niet altijd de vrijheid te nemen in het zelf nemen van beslissingen en het uitten van hun mening. Ook heeft dit het effect dat zij zich niet altijd veilig voelen in het uitvoeren van activiteiten voor de rechten van meisjes. Daarom lijkt de conclusie te zijn dat besluitvorming, normen en lichamelijk integriteit (veiligheid) aspecten zijn van empowerment die beïnvloed kunnen en moeten worden om meiden die opkomen voor hun rechten in hun kracht te zetten.

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Empowerment of girls to be agents of change: qualitative research on young adolescent girls in their role as Girls Right Defender

Although there have been several milestones in achieving girls rights, girls still remain to be the largest group in the world excluded from their rights. Girls face abuse and discrimination simply because of being a girl. Millions of girls are disadvantaged in health, education, work and family life. To name a few harsh realities: every day forty-one thousand girls are forced into marriage, around thirty-two million girls worldwide do not attend primarily school education, fifty percent of all sexual assaults are targeted to girls under the age of sixteen (Girls rights are human rights, 2017).

These violations on the rights of girls are in conflict with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Girls Rights Platform, Plan International). In order to defend, promote and protect the rights of girls several civil society actors are trying to contribute to the compliance of their rights. These actors who we name civil society are institutions, organizations or individuals, for example, non-governmental organizations and (child) human right defenders, but it can also include student clubs, university institutes, charities, trade unions, bloggers and activists (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1996-2008). The main activities of these civil society actors are to advocate, to consult in policy development, to contribute to policy implementation, to collect information and to asses and monitor for example on human rights, justice, and equality (The Role of NGOs and Civil Society in Global Environmental Governance, 2002).

Human rights defenders are actors of civil society who engage in non-violent advocacy for human rights and social justice (Forum SYD, 2017). According to the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders anyone who acts at any moment for any human right is a defender, there is no minimum age required. Defenders are not identified by who they are but by what they do. This means that children who take action to promote their rights and the rights of others are seen as human rights defenders as well (Concept note Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2018). There are many activities that can be pronounced as an action of a defender, such as supporting better governance and accountability, contribution to the implementation of human rights, promoting the realization of human rights, collecting and disseminating information on violations of human rights, and supporting victims. Along with this, it contains raising awareness and knowledge of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, for example, proactively promoting human rights and participate in specific actions

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

like events, campaigns and on-going advocacy (Concept note Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2018).

However, human right defenders are one specific group of actors of civil society who experience the problem of shrinking space of civil society. In general space for civil society is considerably shrinking in many countries in the world, and specifically for youth (Girls Advocacy Alliance, 2016). This shrinking space can be described as the phenomenon that civil society is being restricted in fostering and organizing civic engagement (Forum SYD, 2017). It means that external support for human rights and democracy is shrinking. Which appears by less funding, less availability and quality of channels to dialogue with governments and less public trust in civil society organizations (Monitor Tracking Civic Space, 2018). This worldwide tendency causes challenges for human right's defenders and civil society organizations. These challenges vary from country to country, but in general the shrinking space threatens fundamental rights as freedom of opinion and expression, the right to peaceful assembly and the right of association (Forum SYD, 2017). The way a part of human right defenders nowadays are criminalized, stigmatized and de-legitimized in some countries shows how they are confronted with the problem of shrinking space of civil society. Along with this, it is concerning that some human rights defenders get exposed to violence, treats, murder or imprisonment (Transnational Institute, 2017).

Unfortunately, children human right defenders get exposed to the risk of threats, attacks and other negative consequences linked to their activities as human right defender as well. One very well-known example of a girl's rights defender is Malala Youssafzi who was exposed to an attack, a young adolescent girl who advocated for her right to education and the right to education for many other girls. She has been shot because of being a child right defender, but fortunately she survived the attack on her life and continued her advocating process (Kids Rights, 2014).

Regrettably, this is not the only case in which a child experiences a setback in defending their rights. Children consulted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child discussed that they could not fulfill their role as a human right defender in case they are not allowed or supported to form their own associations and that they fear being harassed if they speak up. In addition, a study conducted by the Centre for Children's Rights of 1600 children from sixty countries showed that only 38 percent of the children felt safe joining a public protest or demonstration and only 34 percent of the children felt safe to express their view in public (Centre for Children's Rights and Save the Children, 2016).

Thus, shrinking space of civil society not only limits the civic engagement of human

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

rights defenders and children human right defenders but can also violate their rights and cause unsafe situations. Therefore, it is important to examine how girls who are defending for their rights can be empowered to overcome these shrinking spaces. For Defence for Children it is one of their main activities to invest in the strengthening of civil society to empower girls and young women and to contribute to equal rights and opportunities for girls and young women (Girl Power Alliance, 2015). Also in this case of shrinking space it could be valuable to look at how girls who are active in defending their rights can be empowered.

Van Eerdewijk and colleagues (2017) developed a conceptual model of women and girls empowerment. They define empowerment as the strengthening of voice (the capacity to speak up and be heard, to shape and share in discussions and decisions in private as well in public) and the expansion of choice (the ability to make and influence choices) through transformation of power relations, to gain more control over their lives and futures. The conceptual model they conduct states that empowerment contains three main elements who interact with each other: agency, resources and institutional structures.

Agency is defined as ‘the ability to pursue goals, express voice and influence and make decisions free from violence and retribution’ (Gammage et al., 2016; Klugman, 2014; Kabeer, 1999). Within the conceptual model of empowerment collective action, decision-making and leadership are highlighted as three specific expressions of agency. First, collective action as expression of agency, when applied to the situation of girl’s defenders, can encompass that girl’s gain solidarity and take action collectively on their interests. Coming together around common goals and interests can enable girls to have more influence than when they act individually and in isolation (Alkire et al., 2013; Gammage et al., 2016; Mosedale, 2005). In addition, working together provides them with mutual support and a shared sense of identity and confidence. One example of collective action is a self-support group, in which girls voluntary come together because of a shared interest or a common goal and provide each other with support (Brody et al., 2015). Furthermore, group formation among girls can build their social capital and strengthen their solidarity, social cohesion and resilience (Evans & Nambiar, 2013). Secondly, leadership (formal and informal) is the ability to lead and inspire social change and to effectively participate in governance. Formal leadership consists of formal authority, as political participation or representation in leadership in companies. Informal leadership refers to the ability to inspire and guide others in addressing a complex problem or to accomplish change (Debebe, 2007). Thirdly, decision-making is described as influencing and making decisions and being able to act on them. Decision-making involves autonomy, being able to make decisions that are motivated by a

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

girl's own values and interests rather than influenced by external pressure (Alkire, 2005). For example, for younger women and girls this can contain personal decisions on what to wear or eat and whether to go out with a friend, go to school or participate in a sport or youth association. Another example is that an adolescent girl exercises choice over her sexual and reproductive health, which involves decisions about marriage and being sexually active (van Eerdewijk et al., 2017). Additionally, it involves ability in reflection, negotiation, resistance and bargaining. This means that it is not enough to only participate in the decision-making processes, you also need to control them (van Eerdewijk et al., 2017). According to Bandura (1989, 2006) agency is also linked to the cognitive attitude of self-efficacy, which can be described as people's believe in their own capabilities in their functioning and life events. Therefore empowerment may lead to feelings of self-efficacy, in which an individual can better persist, effort and deal with problematic situations (Moritsugu, 2014).

Resources as an important element of empowerment is defined as the capital and sources of power that girls have, own or use individually or collectively. According to the conceptual model it contains critical consciousness, bodily integrity and assets. Critical Consciousness is described as girls being able to identify and question how inequality in power operates in their lives (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014). It exists of a range of capabilities of a girl, such as self-efficacy, confidence, self-esteem, self-expression and self-awareness. Through critical consciousness a girl gains the confidence to initiate activities (van Eerdewijk et al., 2017), for example in advocating their rights by starting a petition or organizing a public debate. Secondly, bodily integrity means that a girl has the control and security over her mental and physical well-being and over her own body (van Eerdewijk et al., 2017). Security in this context means that girls are free from violence, threats, force and coercion. In addition, the absence of mental health can occur when a girl for example is depressed, has a mental disorder or is addicted to alcohol. However, mental health also involves the relationship between parent and child, for example, unsupportive parents or living apart from the parents can affect a girl's mental health (Patton et al., 2016). Thirdly, important assets for girls can be for example: income and saving (financial assets), (quality of) access to education (knowledge & skills), time availability (to spend on education, work, social networks, leisure and rest) and at last social capital (relations, connections and social networks) like family, peers, friends, teacher, mentors, and colleagues (van Eerdewijk et al., 2017).

At last, institutional structures is mentioned as an important element of empowerment which can be described as 'the social norms and values that form the behavior of the people and their expressions of agency, and it forms the distribution and control of resources'

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

(Alkire, 2005; Alsop et al., 2006; Samman & Santos, 2009). These structures involve formal laws and policies (family law, health policies, educational policies, agricultural policies etc.), relations (social interactions) and norms (shared values, beliefs and expectations on behavior and interaction). These structures occur at state level, family level, and community level (Kabeer & Subrahmanian, 1996; Klugman et al., 2014; Markel & Jones, 2014; Scott, 2008). Within empowerment of girls shared values, beliefs and expectations in the community, which can be seen as a normative structure, are of influence on the behavior, decisions and choices of girls. For example, if a community leader speaks up against child marriage and the family supports the right of the girl to decide when she wants to marry and with who (van Eerdewijk et al., 2017). Relations are the interactions girls have for example with family, peers, or teachers (van Eerdewijk et al., 2017).

In short, factors that are important in the process of empowerment are agency, resources and institutional structures according to this literature and conceptual model of empowerment of girls. Because of a lack in literature about if and how girls who are defending for their rights experience space of civil society, this research will provide insights in how the tendency of shrinking space manifests itself locally, whether it affects the activities of girls' rights defenders or not, and will look at empowerment as a solution. Therefore the following question is researched: Which characteristics of agency, resources and institutional structures need to be influenced to contribute to the empowerment of girl's rights defenders? In order to answer this question the following sub-questions are needed:

- What is the individual, societal and political context where the girls' rights defenders live in?
- How does the individual, societal and political context relate to agency, resources and institutional structures?
- How do girl's rights defenders experience their current access/ability to agency, resources and institutional structures? And how does this affect their ability to advocate for their rights?
- What can be done on individual, societal and policy level to provide girls rights defenders with (improved) access/ability to agency, resources and institutional structures?

The relevance and the topicality of the empowerment of girl's rights defenders are emphasized by the General Discussion Day on protecting and empowering children as Human Rights Defenders which the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child organizes in September 2018.

This research will contain a qualitative research method conducting half-structured interviews with different Girls rights defenders from different countries to include the different individual, societal and political contexts they live in. Additionally, literature on the

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

context will be used and professional experts from different organizations will be interviewed about the context of girls' rights in their country. Due to the access to girls who are defending their rights through the partner network of Defence for Children and the limited time this research focuses specifically on girls as girls' rights defenders.

Method

The research data is collected from three different countries, Georgia, Sierra Leone and the Netherlands. The choice to be specifically focusing on these three countries was made mainly from the practical reason of accessibility to respondents within these countries through the network of Defence for Children. Another consideration of the chosen diversity in countries was that their context of girls' rights might differ from each other.

Participants

The respondents who were willing to participate in this research were reached through the partner network of Defence for Children. In Georgia nine organizations were asked if they knew potential respondents for this research, girls who were involved in any activity that was related to defending their rights or the rights of other girls. This resulted in four Georgian girls that were able and willing to participate. Additionally, these nine organizations were approached for an interview with a professional expert about the context, six of these organizations participated. In Sierra Leone one partner organization was asked for respondents, which resulted in two girls that have participated. This partner organization also participated in an interview with one of their professional experts. Lastly, in the Netherlands seven organizations were approached for potential respondents wherefrom one girl eventually participated. In addition, for the Netherlands one professional expert was interviewed as well. In total, seven interviews were conducted with seven young adolescent girls. Four girls from Georgia were interviewed, two girls from Sierra Leone and one girl from the Netherlands. Furthermore, eight interviews were conducted with professional experts. Six professional experts from organizations in Georgia, one professional expert from Sierra Leone and one from the Netherlands. The Table gives an overview of the participants, which also is shown in appendix A.

Country	Amount of Participants	Background participants
Georgia	4 girls 6 professional experts	Girls: A. 14 year old girl, from Tbilisi B. 16 year old girl, from Gori C. 17 year old girl, from Gori D. 22 year old girl, from Tbilisi

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

		Professional experts: E. Child psychologist from ‘The Public Health Foundation’ F. Project coordinator of the ‘Bridge of friendship Kartlosi’ G. Georgian team of ‘SOS children villages’, H. Lawyer from the ‘Partnership of Human rights’ and Gender specialist from ‘Save the Children’ I. Youth empowerment program coordinator from ‘World Vision’
Sierra Leone	2 girls 1 professional expert	Girls: J. 17 year old girl, from Beau K. Above 18 year old girl, from Freetown Professional experts: L. Girls Advocacy Alliance project manager from Sierra Leone
Netherlands	1 girls 1 professional expert	Girl: M. 17 year old girl, from Maastricht Professional experts: N. Youth ambassador of sexual and reproductive rights

The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants in the research were guaranteed because names of the participants will not be mentioned. The participation of the participants in the research was entirely voluntary. Additionally, when the girls who participated were under the age of 16 they were asked for their personal signature to agree on some conditions for their participation. This includes the conditions that they were free to stop their participation at any time, that the information received from the participant was only used for research purposes, that they could tell afterwards if they wanted to exclude something they said in the interview, that their privacy was respected by not using their names in the research and lastly permission was asked to record the interviews, in order to transcribe these.

Interviews

In Georgia and in the Netherlands the interviews were face-to-face, the interviews with girls in Sierra Leone were through skype. The duration of the interviews was mostly about one hour. Sometimes they took a little bit longer depending on how the interview went and if clarifying questions were needed. All the interviews were recorded and notes were taken for the transcription of the interviews. The data was not only collected by the interviews with the girls’ rights defenders. Additional information about the social and political context was gained by interviews with field experts from non-governmental organizations who are

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

working on or contributing to the rights of children within the country.

To get insights on the individual context of the interviewed girls, they were asked about their lives, where they grew up and, what they liked doing, what they wanted to become in their future and what kind of activities they were doing on the rights of girls. In addition, the professionals from different organizations were asked about the social context, the question which were used here are illustrated in appendix B. Moreover, the interviewed girls were asked about the different elements of empowerment, an overview of an extended topic list of this is shown in appendix C. First of all, they were asked about collective action: do you work together with others? And what are the benefits for you to work together? Secondly, they were asked about decision-making. Like, if they think they are able to decide for themselves, if they ever experienced a decision was made for them were they did not agree on and if there are things that they find easy or difficult in making decisions. Thirdly, they were asked about which role they usually have within a group to get more information about leadership. Fourthly, they were asked about their self-efficacy, if they feel free to express their opinion and if they find it easy or difficult to express their opinion. Fifthly, the girls were asked about critical consciousness, if they can bring in their own ideas and own initiatives within their activities. Sixthly, there were questions about bodily integrity, were girls were asked if they feel supported in their activities and if they have felt unsafe during their activities. Seventhly, there were questions asked about assets, like how much time they spend on their activities, how they get financial means for their activities and if they think they have enough knowledge and skills to be active on children rights. Eighthly, the girls were asked about if there are rules about girls' rights in their country like laws or policies. Ninthly, the girls were asked how they thought people in their country think about the rights of girls and about their activities on girls' rights, for information about norms in society. Lastly, the girls were asked about relations, which people are important for them in their lives.

Data analysis

Before the data was collected, a topic list was made to formulate the interview questions. The answers to the interview questions were qualitative analyzed in order to answer the research questions. To ensure reliability the Nvivo program was used as a tool to document the qualitative analyses. In this analyzing process there was looked at patterns and at the suggestions for improvements of the participants. The collected data was coded on the context form individual, societal, political and to the following concepts of empowerment: Agency; collective action (take action together, working together, mutual support, shared

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

sense of identity and confidence), decision making (autonomy, making decisions without external pressure, ability in reflection, ability in negotiation, ability in resistance and bargaining), leadership (political participation, addressing the problem, inspiring and guiding others, leading role within a company/group), and self-efficacy. Resources; critical consciousness (self-efficacy, confidence, self-esteem, self-expression and self-awareness), bodily integrity (control and security over own body, mental and physical well-being), assets (finances, time, knowledge, skills, social capital). Institutional structures; formal laws and policies, relations, norms. These topics have contributed to answering the questions ‘how do girl’s rights defenders experience their current access/ability to agency, resources and instructional structures?’ and ‘what can be done on individual, societal and policy level to provide girls rights defenders with (improved) access/ability to agency, resources and institutional structures?’. Furthermore, the topics individual context, societal context and political context were analyzed and asked upon in order to answer the question: ‘what is the individual, societal and political context where the girl’s rights defender lives in?’.

At last, the girls who are defending for their rights were asked about what they think that needs to be changed to carry out their activities better and in order to realize their rights. Eventually this led to an overall conclusion about which characteristics of agency, resources and institutional structures need to be changed/adjusted to contribute to the empowerment of girl’s rights defenders.

Results

The girls that were interviewed have in common that they grew up in a big city and except for one girl they all still live with their parents. The girls vary in ages from fourteen years old till the age of twenty-two.

Agency

Collective action. Except for one girl, all girls that were interviewed are active within a youth organization or another organization they’re volunteering for. Moreover, most of the girls from all the three countries had in common that they are involved in media activities. Through interviews and written articles in magazines or websites, through talking shows on public television and radio, they reach out to people about the rights of girls. Other activities that they do and were mentioned by the girls are organizing workshops and masterclasses for youngsters, discussions, film shows, film screening, making handcrafts, bracelets, campaigns, brochures and giving presentations.

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The topics the girls work on differ over countries, in Georgia the girls focus on gender equality, children's rights, access to education for girls, and stereotypes. In Sierra Leone the girls focus on topics as female genital mutilation, teenage pregnancies, and sexual education. The girl from the Netherlands focuses on the topic of abuse.

There are different approaches used by the girls to carry out their activities. The girls from Sierra Leone discussed that they engage other girls in their activities to talk with them about their rights and responsibilities and how to communicate about it. Additionally, they engage the media and let children talk on the radio and TV about challenges they're facing and about their experiences. Furthermore, they mention they try to encourage other girls in their self-esteem by involving them in advocating activities. Lastly, they try to stimulate peer group influence to encourage girls to have a positive mindset on their own, because the girls mentioned that on the societal level they experienced that parents have a lot of influence. The Netherlands girl mentions she engages youth workers from the Netherlands youth services in her activities by giving them advice from her own experiences through workshops. In addition, she engages government by sharing insights from her own experience with members of the Dutch parliament.

All the girls who were active for an organization experienced benefits of working together in the group. The girls mentioned for example learning from others and the diversity of ideas. Another advantage participant K came up with is the strength of bringing a message with a group: 'it is easier for people to take the message when they see when other people are already accepting it. For example, if you go to a community to tell people, just you, it's hard I'm not the only one who thinks that young girls should go to school. Five other people like myself think like that so it's easy for them as long as they see the common with other people it's easier.'

Decision making. On individual level all girls mentioned that they feel like they're able to make decisions for themselves. For example, in Georgia the interviewed girls decide for themselves and talk about their decisions with their parents. The girls still ask for advice, discuss their decisions at home and sometimes agree on decisions in dialogue with their parents. This shows similarities with autonomy, a non-hierarchical relation between parent and child and open dialogue which characterizes an authoritative parenting style.

Additionally, all the girls mentioned that sometimes it's more difficult for them to make a decision. They experience this when for example decisions are not supported by their parents, when the outcome of a decision is unknown, when they are in doubt about a decision, or when a decision can hurt someone's feelings.

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

On societal level in Georgia and Sierra Leone a collectivist culture is visible. Obedience, dependency and modest is asked from children when it comes to decision-making, which are aspects of an authoritarian parenting style. This is shown by the comments of two Georgian girls who mentioned that it's not very common in Georgia to make decisions by yourself because for a lot of youngsters of their age decisions are made by their parents. Similarly to this, the girls from Sierra Leone answered to the question if decisions were ever made for them that on societal level it's normal that parents make the decisions for their children. 'In Sierra Leone when you're below eighteen you're a kid and you do everything your parents say and you don't ask questions' said participant K. Therefore on societal level she teaches other girls about decision-making: 'we try to teach them sometimes these decisions that you're parents make they might doing it in your best interest but it's not really helpful for you in the long run. So sometimes try to start negotiations, how about to do this in another way.'

Leadership. On individual level almost all of the girls mentioned that it depends on the context, whether they are in school, among friends or with the organization they volunteer for, and on the activity which role they take while working in a group. The roles that emerged from the interviews are a leadership role, a coordinating role, a facilitating role, a counselling role and the role of group member. Important aspects that were mentioned for the leadership role are planning, management and communication skills and responsibilities. One Georgian girl (participant B) mentioned that she developed from group member to a leadership role by being active in different student clubs which increased her communication skills. Another example is from one girl from Sierra Leone (participant K) who mentions she likes the role of counsellor the most because she likes to hear the personal stories of the girls she works with.

Self-efficacy. On individual level the Georgian girls and the girl from the Netherlands mentioned they feel free to express their opinions. One of the Georgian girls (participant D) mentioned that she first find it difficult to express her opinion because she was shy. However, she told that when she realized that all youngsters of her age can have a moment of being shy and that it's normal to not always have something to say, her self-esteem was raised which makes it easier for her nowadays to express her opinions. Another girl from Georgia (participant A) stated that it depends on the context if it's easy or not to express her opinion, for her it is easier among her friends then at school. She said that the feeling of trust and support are important factors in this.

For girls from Sierra Leone it's different on their individual level, they sometimes find it easy and sometimes difficult to express their opinions. Participant J said: 'sometimes it's really

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

difficult to talk about what we're facing', 'There is this societal taboo about children walking to their elders and talking to them just like that, so mostly you have to go through some other adult person maybe to just present the situation to the next adult before you can be able to go to them and talk to them.' This difficulty they face is related to collectivistic cultural aspects on societal level where the relationship between parent and child is hierarchical and respect for elderly people is highly valued. Furthermore, participant K mentions that it's not easy to talk about sensitive topics that are actually taboo, in these situations you have to choose your words carefully. On societal level the Netherlands girl (participant M) mentioned that it's easy to express her opinion because of the freedom of expression as one of the human rights is highly valued in the Netherlands.

Resources

Critical consciousness. On individual level all girls mentioned that within the groups they are active in they can bring in their own ideas, initiatives or activities. One girl from Sierra Leone said: 'all we do is based on our own ideas, the activities.'

Bodily Integrity. On individual level all interviewed girls mentioned that they feel supported in the activities they're doing. They feel supported by their family and friends. On societal level they also feel supported by the organizations that they work with, and by one of their teachers. One girl from Sierra Leone (participant J) specifically mentions the ministry of social affairs, Ngo's and donor partners as the ones who support her in the activities. Some girls discussed examples of how this support was expressed to them. They mentioned the given feedback by the organization or from a teacher, financial support, technical support, advices, sharing of knowledge, text messages and video calls as forms of support.

Furthermore, when the girls were asked about their feeling of safety and the resistance they encountered while working on their activities on the rights of girls there is a difference between the three countries. First of all, the girl from the Netherlands (participant M) mentioned she never felt unsafe during her activities and stated that safety is really important, especially when group members experienced a violation of their rights and when vulnerable topics are discussed. Additionally, on societal level she never encountered resistance in her activities and she arguments that this is because of the opportunity to speak out freely in the Netherlands. Secondly, the Georgian girls feel safe in doing their activities, they didn't have had any resistance on their activities on girls' rights. However, they acknowledge that on societal level it can be unsafe for other girls' rights defenders that are even more active than they are. They name offensive comments on social media and physical violence as examples of this unsafety. Lastly, on societal level the girls of Sierra Leone recognize more and more

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

support from within the communities now their awareness is rising on the rights of girl, and of children in general. At the same time on individual level girls of Sierra Leone mention that they have felt unsafe sometimes during their activities on the rights of girls. They indicate that on societal level the topics they discuss (e.g. early marriage and female genital mutilation) are sensitive topics that have a long history in some communities. Discussing these issues has led to physical threats from community members, as they feel these customs are part of the culture and should be preserved. Therefore they avoid some communities, they don't involve these communities in their activities for their own safety reasons.

Assets. On individual level it differs how much time the girls spend on their activities on the rights of girls. What they all have in common is that they have to combine their volunteer activities on the rights of girls with their study. Which sometimes gives conflict in time.

Financial means for their activities are mostly provided by the organizations they volunteer for or by donor organizations. The girls from Sierra Leone mentioned that they sometimes fund their activities themselves.

Overall, the girls mention that they have enough knowledge and skills for being active on the rights of girls. Some girls argue that they gained this knowledge and skills through their experience from participating in projects, youth clubs and other activities, or they experienced violations on their rights themselves. Additionally, they mention civic education as school course and advocacy skills training as sources which provided them with knowledge and skills. Only the youngest girl from Georgia (participant A) that was interviewed mentioned she isn't skilled enough yet and wants to develop her communication skills to improve her presentation skills.

Institutional structures

Formal laws and policies. What is a widespread observation from within each country is that there are laws and policies to protect girls from violations of their rights. All three countries have a children rights acts in which the rights of girls are included. Despite this, in all of the countries there is a lack in implementation and monitoring of these laws and policies which appears in a lack of information and knowledge among the population, a lack of available services or no access to existing services. Poverty is a major underlying problem for this, especially in Georgia and Sierra Leone where it already can be challenging to meet the basic needs of these girls and children in general, like for example education and health services or services for physical social development. And for example Participant N mentions that in the Netherlands among marginalized groups girls face problems in access to anti-

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

conception because it's not affordable for them.

Norms. On societal level there are some norms that can lead to violation on the rights of girls. For example, a professional expert of Georgia mentions that children often face violence within the family and school environment, because it's culturally accepted and normalized for the major population of Georgia to psychologically and physically violate children within their child-rearing. Parents are beating their children and shout to their children. According to literature this manner of parenting can be described as a directive punitive parenting style. The experts argue that there is a lack of education on parenting competencies among parents and they state that awareness needs to be raised about the non-violate method on the upbringing of children. Another explanation of this violation is the non-constructive way of solving problems between parents within their marriage, this can result in domestic violence towards children. The underlying norm in this situation is that families are sacral institutions in Georgia therefore it's culturally not acceptable or allowed for girls or women to divorce in case of problems within their marriage. Additionally, one of the professional experts of Georgia mentions the problem of high amount of child marriages in the regions among ethnic minority, because the norms of obligation by religion, cultural acceptance of families pushing the girl to get married, the disapproval of having a boyfriend or a girlfriend. Lastly the professional experts mentions the norm that a girls is obligated to marry the men from who she is expecting a child and because of a lack of sexual education a lot of girls get pregnant at an early age. Similarly in Sierra Leone there are some social norms which are affecting the rights of girls as well. The professional expert that was interviewed from Sierra Leone (participant L) mentions that the role of girls in communities is being perceived as that girls should be in home taking care for the husband and children. Participant L says: 'when girls get mature when they at the age of fifteen or sixteen years, you see people handing them over for marriage to a men in the community'. Additionally, the interviewed girls from Sierra Leone mentioned that early marriage and female genital mutilation are sensitive and hard topics to talk about within some communities in Sierra Leone because the people see early marriages and female genital mutilation as part of their culture.

Relations. On individual level the girls mentioned family relatives like parents, sisters, brothers and friends as important people in their lives. This shows that all of the interviewed girls have a social network wherein they interact with others and wherein they build relationships with others.

Improvements

When the girls were asked about what they change in their community, the main thing that

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

they came up with was to organize collective action by involving other girls in their activities, making them aware of their rights, bringing them together and inspiring them to speak up. Participant K stated: ‘We can change the way young people are thinking and younger people can teach that even to younger ones. So for every project that you do whether you preaching about education, whether you preaching about gender based violence as long as it spreading the right message you’re doing it well’. Additionally, several girls mention that they can be a role model for other girls. Furthermore, education and awareness raising are mentioned as interventions that can contribute to the compliance of girls’ rights. Participant C from Georgia mentions that schools should include lessons about gender equality. Similarly a professional expert of Georgia (participant E) states that through education people can be provided with information about their rights and consequences of behavior. Lastly, the girls mention they need more support to better carry out their activities, specifically support from adults and government in terms of advice, motivation, financial means and awareness raising.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to examine if and how girls who are defending for their rights experience the shrinking space for civil society within their activities and which factors of empowerment can be influenced for the girls to be or to get (more) empowered. This was researched in the context of three different countries, Georgia, Sierra Leone and the Netherlands. Seven girls who are active in defending their rights and eight professional experts from different organizations were interviewed.

The results are showing the following patterns in the individual, societal and political context of the girls’ rights defenders. In their individual context they seem to be girls living with their parents in cities being active as volunteer for a youth organization. This similarity among the participants could be a coincidence or it could be explained with accessibility to the infrastructure of youth organizations when living in the city, which could make it easier for these girls to be involved in the activities on the rights of girls. Another explanation could be the selection of the participants through organizations instead of approaching them individually. The difference in the societal context the girls live in influences the topics that they are active on, the way they carry out their activities and some differences in the experience of agency, resources and institutional structures. Additionally, the norms on societal level are related to the violations of the rights of girls within that social context. The pattern that is seen in political context is that there are laws and policies but that

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

implementation and monitoring are lacking.

Furthermore, the results show that agency and resources are related to individual context and societal context. Agency tells more about the individual behaviors of the girls in interaction with their direct environment, as their family, friends, school and organizations they part of. The availability and accessibility to resources are depending on the societal context and political context where the girls live in. The lack of implementation and monitor of policies can cause absence of (social) public services, like services that provide safety and healthcare for bodily integrity or education that provides the girls knowledge and skills as one of their assets. The societal, political context and individual context are related to institutional structures, because norms arise and consist on societal level and laws and policies are developed on political level but need to be implemented on societal level. The individual level is related to institutional structures because it contains the relations of an individual within the structures of society.

Moreover, from the results it appears that the interviewed girls experience the ability to agency (being active with and within a group, the ability to make their own decisions, the ability to take a leadership role and to have an attitude of self-efficacy). However, they do not always experience accessibility to these aspects of agency. The girls' rights defenders sometimes face difficulties in making decisions, expressing their opinions because some norms on societal level within Georgia and Sierra Leone are oppressing the freedom of decision-making and the freedom of expression. This leads to the feelings of unsafety while carrying out their activities in some communities and it leads to avoiding these communities for safety reasons. Therefore, it's affecting their resource of bodily integrity (which includes safety) and it affects their ability to advocate for the rights of girls in these communities. In addition, the lack of implementation and monitoring of policies affects the access for girl's rights defenders to health services, educational services and psycho-social services.

Lastly, to provide girls rights defenders with improved access/ability to agency, resources and institutional structures norms on societal level should be influenced through education and awareness raising in communities to increase the space of girls' rights defenders to be able making decisions that in their concern and to be able to express their opinion freely whatever the topic might be. This will contribute for the girls to feel safe at all times while carrying out their activities, and therefore increases their bodily integrity. Moreover, adults and government can contribute to this improvement by supporting the girls rights defenders in terms of giving advices, providing financial means and contributing to awareness raising.

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Therefore, in conclusion it seems that decision making, bodily integrity, and norms as characteristics of agency, resources and institutional structures can be and should be influenced in order for the girls' rights defenders to be empowered. The outcome of this research responds to the conceptual model of empowerment developed by Van Eerdewijk and colleagues (2017), because the results confirm the interaction between the three main elements (agency, resources and institutional structures) of empowerment. In addition, the research shows that girls who are actively defending their rights not necessarily are affected by the shrinking space of civil society in their activities but more or less by the institutional structures, the norms within on societal level.

Unfortunately, this research knows some limitations. Due to the small sample it's important to notice that the results of this qualitative research cannot be generalized. Additionally, the tight time schedule and the non-response of potential participants created an imbalance in the number of participants between the three different countries. As consequence this research provided more insights and knowledge about girls who are defending for their rights in the context of Georgia, then in the context of Sierra Leone or the Netherlands.

However, this study provides new insights which can be used as a starting point for follow-up research. Additionally, the situation of girls who are defending for their rights is analyzed in a comprehensive way, not only by researching their individual context but also by including the societal and political context they're living in. Furthermore, capturing the experiences of these girls who are fighting for their rights and the rights of other girls is giving them a voice and might provide useful recommendations in how these girls can be supported or empowered in their activities on the rights of girls.

In a follow-up research on the empowerment of girls defending for their rights or child human rights defenders in general it is recommended to provide a bigger sample to be able to make more general statements. Additionally, it would be interesting to do a research about if and how boys or men experience shrinking space of civil society in their advocating on the rights of girls to see if there are any differences and what role boys and men can have in the empowerment of girls to claim their rights.

Thus, this research shows how girls' rights defenders experience their access and ability to the elements of their empowerment and how institutional structures, specifically norms of society can be of influence to the agency and resources of girls' rights defenders.

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Appendices

Appendix A overview participants research

Country	Amount of Participants	Background participants
Georgia	4 girls 6 professional experts	<p>Girls:</p> <p>A. 14 year old girl, from Tbilisi B. 16 year old girl, from Gori C. 17 year old girl, from Gori D. 22 year old girl, from Tbilisi</p> <p>Professional experts:</p> <p>E. Child psychologist from ‘The Public Health Foundation’ F. Project coordinator of the ‘Bridge of friendship Kartlosi’ G. Georgian team of ‘SOS children villages’, H. Lawyer from the ‘Partnership of Human rights’ and Gender specialist from ‘Save the Children’ I. Youth empowerment program coordinator from ‘World Vision’</p>
Sierra Leone	2 girls 1 professional expert	<p>Girls:</p> <p>J. 17 year old girl, from Beau K. Above 18 year old girl, from Freetown</p> <p>Professional experts:</p> <p>L. Girls Advocacy Alliance project manager from Sierra Leone</p>
Netherlands	1 girls 1 professional expert	<p>Girl:</p> <p>M. 17 year old girl, from Maastricht</p> <p>Professional experts:</p> <p>N. Youth ambassador of sexual and reproductive rights</p>

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Appendix B Interview questions for professional experts

Interviewing organizations experts*Context*

What issues/ challenges are there for children and youth in Georgia?

Which especially for Girls?

Which actors are involved in these issues/ challenges?

Why are these issues or challenges? (what makes it an issue or challenge?)

Are there any policies on these issues / challenges?

Who is working on these issues/challenges?

Is the effect/output of this work already visible?

What is going well working on these issues/challenges? What is not going well?

What can be improved on girls' rights in Georgia? Who can have an important role in this?

Girls' rights defenders

Are there girls' rights defenders in Georgia? (Girls who defend for the rights of girls)

Who are they? Can you give an example?

What are they doing to defend the rights of girls?

How are they doing this?

What barriers do they face? (Girls who advocate for or promote their rights)

What do they need to overcome these barriers? How can this be provided to them?

What risks are they get exposed to? (Girls who advocate for or promote their rights)

Are there systems/measurements/policies that available in Georgia that can protect them from these risks?

By whom are Girls' Rights defenders supported?

Can you give an example of a good practices of a Girls' rights defender in Georgia? What was the result?

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Appendix C Topic list - interviews with girls who defend for their rights

Table 1 Agency

<i>Topic Collective action</i>
-What kind of activities are you doing on the protection on the rights of girls?
- Do you work together with others?
- What are the benefits for you of working together?
<i>Topic Decision-making</i>
- Are you able to decide things for yourself?
- Have you ever experienced that decisions were made for you were you not agreed on?
- Are there any things easy or difficult for you about making decisions?
<i>Topic Leadership</i>
- What role do you usually take within a group?
- Can you give an example?
<i>Topic Self-efficacy</i>
- How easy or difficult is it for you to express your opinion in general?
- Does it matter whether it is in school, with friends, in your family, in another group?

Table 2 Resources

<i>Topic Critical Consciousness</i>
- Can you bring in your own ideas, initiatives, or activities for the protection of girls' rights?
<i>Topic Bodily integrity</i>
- Who supports you in your activities to protect girls' rights?
- How/ in what way do they support you?
- Have you ever felt unsafe because of your girls' rights activities?
- Have you ever encountered resistance from others?

EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Topic Assets

- How much time do you spend on activities for girls' rights?
 - How do you get financial means to do this?
 - Do you think you have enough knowledge and skills to be active in girl's rights?
-

Table 3 Institutional structures

Topic Laws and formal policies

- Do you know whether the government has made rules about girls' rights? Have you heard of any laws or policies for example?
-

Topic Norms

- What do people here think about girls and their rights?
 - What do people think about the things you are doing to defend girls' rights?
-

Topic Relations

- Which people are important for you in your life?
-