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'Empowerment' of adolescent girls and young women in Kinshasa: Research about girls, by girls **Lyndsay McLean and Anny T. Modi**

In mid-2015, a team of 15 Congolese 'girl researchers' were recruited, trained and mentored by the DFID-funded La Pépinière programme. They conducted peer-to-peer research to explore the experiences, perceptions and aspirations of adolescent girls and young women in Kinshasa, DRC, in relation to their economic and social empowerment. In this fragile urban context, societal and personal expectations of girls and young women are high and they must carefully navigate precarious circumstances to survive economically and socially and maintain their reputation as 'good girls'. Whilst it is always important to ensure that development programmes are grounded in women and girls' own realities and aspirations, this is especially the case in fragile contexts where the risks are often magnified. The participatory engagement described here is a way to understand these realities and inform programmes to facilitate women and girls' own journeys of empowerment.

Keywords Adolescent girls, young women, empowerment, DRC, fragility, participatory research

Introduction

In 2015, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) launched *La Pépinière*, a programme that aims to support the economic empowerment of adolescent girls and young women aged 10-24 in Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). *La Pépinière* broadly translates as 'incubator' or 'greenhouse', in the sense of nurturing plants to grow healthy and strong.

Given the dearth of studies on adolescent girls and women in Kinshasa, a major focus of the initial phase of the programme has been to conduct research on their everyday realities and the factors that enable or constrain their economic and social empowerment. This research is intended to inform the policies and programmes of government, donors and civil society organisations to ensure that they reflect the priorities expressed by adolescent girls and young women themselves, and that they address the most important factors that facilitate or impede positive outcomes for them.

This article summarises the approach, findings and implications of a qualitative study conducted in mid-2015 by a team of 15 Congolese girl researchers, who were recruited, trained and mentored by the *La Pépinière* programme. It focuses on the experiences, perceptions and aspirations of adolescent girls and young women living in Kinshasa with respect to their economic and social empowerment. We argue that in this fragile urban context, it is essential for development programmes to be rooted in a comprehensive understanding of how women and girls view the process of empowerment; otherwise there is a risk that programmes may aggravate their already precarious circumstances.

Conceptualising 'empowerment' in Kinshasa

There is considerable debate in international development literature about the extent to which programmes that aim to 'empower' girls and women can ever be truly empowering. There are two main strands to this debate. Firstly, a concern with what the term 'empowerment' means to different people and in different contexts. Secondly, and relatedly, a critique of the notion that 'empowerment' can somehow be brought about through top-down development programmes.

In her ethnography of the politics and practices of a women's empowerment project implemented by state agencies and feminist NGOs in rural India, Aradhana Sharma (2008) addresses both issues.

She chronicles the 'less-often-told stories' (p xv) about India's economic liberalisation, from the view of marginalised women targeted by the state-NGO Mahila Samakhya empowerment programme.

Sharma describes how 'empowerment' has been co-opted as the new development mantra in a context where the state is privatising services, dismantling welfare and promoting 'self-regulatory' modes of governance (2008, p xvii). She warns that 'empowerment' is being depoliticised and regulated, constraining women's abilities to forge their own pathways to improve their lives. Yet, at the same time, in spite of state efforts to control outcomes, Sharma's ethnography reveals that such programmes can nonetheless result in political action on the part of those marginalised from power, as well as a number of other unintended consequences.

In order to understand the complex outcomes of interventions which aim to foster 'empowerment', Sharma therefore encourages us to examine these interventions in their particular contexts, to understand what 'empowerment' means to specific women in specific places at specific times, and how development programmes can variously nurture these processes, reduce or aggravate the risks that women face.

Urban Kinshasa is a very different environment from rural India. Urban environments can present particular opportunities and challenges for women's and girls' empowerment. On the one hand, women and girls have increased access to services and to markets and economic opportunities, albeit often poorly paid, in poor conditions, and insecure; and on the other hand, they are exposed to greater risks, including of gender-based and other forms of violence (Brouder and Sweetman 2015). These risks can be particularly acute in poorer or more fragile urban neighbourhoods, where women are often faced with inadequate services, poor infrastructure, precarious economic conditions, a huge burden of unpaid domestic labour, and sometimes daily violence (ibid).

The city of Kinshasa is a particularly fragile and challenging urban context, marked by the long-term absence of state services, corruption, high rates of unemployment, poverty and inequality (UNDP 2009)[1], and daily insecurity. Around half of Kinshasa's inhabitants are under 20 years old, and the population has grown rapidly in recent years as a result of rural exodus and conflict (UNDP/UN Women 2015, 7). A recent ethnographic study of economic and social life in Kinshasa documents a precarious, and sometimes violent, environment in which the majority of *Kinois* (Kinshasa's inhabitants) exercise multiple and creative forms of *débrouille* (resourcefulness) to survive on a day-to-day basis (Ayipam 2014).

In 2015, La Pépinière's research team undertook secondary analysis of two national surveys – the 2013 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) and the 2012 *Enquête 1-2-3* on employment, the informal sector and household consumption – to look at the situation of adolescent girls and young women in Kinshasa. Whilst the gap between young women and young men in Kinshasa is generally lower than the rest of DRC – particularly in the area of education – it is still stark across multiple areas: employment status, decision-making and control of income, access to health-care, and experience of gender-based violence (See also UNDP /UN Women 2015).

A number of smaller-scale studies point to the precarious situation of particular groups of young women, including orphans, stepchildren in the case of remarriage, domestic workers and *fillesmères* (unmarried girl mothers). The numbers of girls and young women living and working in the streets is significant, and many of these young women engage in commercial sex work as a means to survive, but also as a means of social integration into groups called *écuries* (War Child 2015).

Until recently, very few donors have implemented development programmes in Kinshasa, despite the significant levels of poverty and violence. Most international funding has been channelled to

eastern DRC, which has been affected by outbreaks of war and violence since the mid-1990s and where the high rates of sexual violence against women have been widely reported in the international media. DFID's funding for *La Pépinière* is an attempt to redress this imbalance.

DFID's vision for *La Pépinière* is that economic empowerment can serve as an entry point for improving the situation for adolescent girls and young women in DRC. To some extent, this might be seen as building on Naila Kabeer's (1999) argument that economic empowerment underpins the wider social and political empowerment of women as individuals and as a collective marginalised group. Kabeer argues that, without economic resources, women's ideas, aims and aspirations cannot be realized. Yet at the same time, she recognizes that money and material resources alone are insufficient; women also need awareness that they want to change their lives, and less tangible resources such as education, training, and support from other women are important.

Indeed, there has been significant criticism of women's empowerment programmes that have a narrow focus on increasing women's income generation. Several authors argue that unless interventions are able to foster women's voice and agency and redress the structural inequalities they face, then any economic *advancement* a woman makes (for example increased income or assets) will not result in economic *empowerment* because she will not be able to control those assets. For example, Anne-Marie Golla et al (2011) stress that empowerment will only be possible and sustainable if there is change at multiple levels: within the individual (capability, knowledge, self-esteem); in communities and institutions (including changing norms and behaviour); in available resources and economic opportunities; and in the wider political and legal environment. Similarly, Cecilia Lutrell et al (2009) emphasise the inter-relationship, and sometimes the inter-dependence, of different forms of empowerment – economic, social, political, and psychological. [2]

This has led many authors to insist that 'economic empowerment' itself needs to be conceptualised in broad terms. For example, Rosalind Eyben (2008) argues that economic empowerment includes a person's ability to think and plan beyond immediate survival needs, to be able to exercise choice. In a recent review of economic empowerment programmes, Paola Perezniето and Georgia Taylor (2014, 236) define economic empowerment as 'A process whereby women's and girls' lives are transformed from a situation where they have limited power and access to assets to a situation where they experience economic advancement, and their power and agency is enhanced.'

The research described in the rest of this article sought to explore what 'empowerment' means to adolescent girls and young women living in poorer neighbourhoods of urban Kinshasa. It aimed to unpack the relationships between the different domains of their lives – economic, social and personal. The ultimate goal was to inform the development of *La Pépinière*, as well as other interventions to ensure that they support rather than constrain the efforts of girls and young women to improve their status and wellbeing.

A 'girl-led' approach and methodology

The challenges of conducting research with children and young adults, especially involving Westerners researching in non-Western contexts, are well-documented (see Asselin and Doiron 2016). There are a variety of methodologies rooted in different disciplinary traditions, theories of childhood, and views of ethics, which adopt different approaches to the participation of children.

Unusually perhaps for an international donor, DFID has placed importance on girls' genuine participation in the development and implementation of the *La Pépinière* programme, including in conducting the research. Drawing on experiences of initiatives like Girl Hub, as well a growing body

of literature on participatory research methods with children (especially the 'Children's movement' approach, *ibid.*), the *La Pépinière* research team decided to develop a Girl-Led Research Unit (GLRU), in order to engage adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) as peer researchers.

A methodology was developed to recruit, train and build the capacity of 15 'girl researchers' aged 16-24 from various social and geographical backgrounds, to be involved 'in meaningful ways such as formulating the research questions, planning the methodology, collecting and/or analysing data, drafting recommendations and disseminating findings' (Coad and Evans 2008, 43). Most girls lived with their families, one lived alone; two were unmarried 'girl mothers'; 11 girls were still in education (secondary school, college or university) and four were working in the informal sector.

The process involved a series of workshops to brainstorm concepts, formulate research questions, train the girl researchers in qualitative peer-to-peer interviewing, discuss ethics and risks, and undertake participatory data analysis [3]. The team included seven girls who were illiterate or semiliterate and thus the workshops employed visual methods and were conducted in French and Lingala; the interview guides were produced in audio versions; and data collection was undertaken using smartphones to record interviews. The girl researchers worked in four teams, and were mentored on a weekly basis by four research mentors throughout the research phase.

Each girl researcher 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 adolescent girls and young women in their communities and social networks. In total, 177 interviews were conducted, 117 with adolescent girls and young women aged 12 to 24 and 60 with influential adults. Although the sample was purposive, it included a diversity of girls and young women 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 extremely motivated, the quality of the data collection was high, and the consistency of findings across interviews and with other studies gives confidence in the results. Each girl researcher was mentored during the research process and participated in a process of selfmonitoring of her own capacities (organisational skills, problem-solving skills, communication and social skills and qualitative research skills). Testimonies demonstrate that each experienced a positive transformation in her personal and professional capacities during the research. Two girl researchers, the first aged 22 and the second aged 24, told us:

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.

By becoming a girl researcher, I also learn a lot myself and this helps me to progress today, tomorrow or in the future. It has helped be to become more knowledgeable... and I now know what I am capable of by myself.

Research findings: adolescent girls and young women in Kinshasa

In an initial 'agenda-setting' workshop with the girl researchers, six main research themes related to social and economic empowerment emerged: the perceptions and social status of adolescent girls and young women; their economic activities and lives; their decision-making power; their social lives— including people and organisations who are influential; their perspectives on empowerment;

and their aspirations for the future. A set of research questions was developed for each theme, and the girls then undertook the research as outlined above. This section summarises the key findings.

Perceptions and norms about adolescent girls and young women

In urban Kinshasa, the transition from childhood to adulthood for girls tends to be a moment rather than a process, which is still marked by the onset of puberty. The testimonies of girls interviewed suggest that, at this point, changes can be rapid. Girls can suddenly be expected to bring income into their household, and many will receive sexual advances from men in their neighbourhood, and even within their families. This contrasts with what they and adults interviewed said about boys, for whom the transition to adulthood is widely seen as a gradual process, largely marked by boys' increasing economic autonomy.

The interviews conducted reveal high, sometimes conflicting, expectations of adolescent girls and young women – that variously emanate from different Congolese traditions, religious edicts, and modern ideas. These expectations are held by those around them in their families and neighbourhoods, but also by girls themselves. Many are preoccupied with protecting their reputation, and being '*bien vu*' (well-viewed) in society.

This can be very stressful for girls and young women, especially given that many live in overpopulated, unplanned multi-ethnic neighbourhoods with poor infrastructure and in multiple-occupant rooms and houses. Levels of trust among neighbours are mostly lower than in rural villages, privacy is a constant challenge and the dress and behaviour of young women, including their reactions to male advances, are often closely monitored and harshly judged. One adolescent girl aged 14, from Masina Commune, said:

They always think badly of girls. If they see you chatting with boys, they expect you to get pregnant and stop your studies.... It is the people in the quartier that think like this. Even in my family. My paternal uncle can come to the house and if he sees me in shorts or a mini-skirt, he thinks that I have started love affairs with men.

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' by studying, 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). A 34-year-old man from Kinseso Commune described such girls as follows:

Girls that are said to be less serious include "Mitu etoka nzinzi" (those with flies in their heads), "bana boya toli" (those who refuse advice), "likolo likolo" (in the air, in the air). Those who dress badly – short dress, bare back, belly button on the outside... transparent neckline, underwear showing, bad characters, impolite

It is variously 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 has a child and becomes a *fille-mère* (unmarried girl mother) or is known to have had an abortion (fairly common in this context with poor access to family planning services and contraceptives), then her reputation as a 'bad girl' is cemented and she suffers stigma and exclusion from several social spaces – often including school and church.

The responsibility or blame for meeting these expectations, or falling short of them, 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 adolescent girls and young women themselves – of why these expectations are so difficult to achieve. There is little recognition of the huge challenges a young woman 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 is very difficult for a young woman 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 them '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 adolescent girls and young women proactively combine sums of money from different people, and sometimes with money they generate through their own economic activities. Most adolescent girls and young women interviewed were in full-time education. Many were supported economically by family members, but several girls and young women combined their studies and economic activities, for example through engaging in small trading at school, or during school holidays.

The research revealed a significant lack of salaried employment opportunities in the formal sector for girls and young women. A small minority interviewed had formal work, which in any case is difficult to combine with education. This 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.

The predominant economic activity was small trading in the informal sector, mainly foodstuffs, and, sometimes, personal items. Around half of the adolescent girls and young women interviewed engaged in small trading, most often street or market selling or via social networks and at school. Kinshasa is a challenging environment for trading with many girls and young women working long hours and competing with each other in particular trades and activities. Those most successful tend to have relatively good social capital, in terms of relationships of trust and reciprocity. Several young women received 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 for the participants was hairdressing (braiding). A few girls and young women also combined different economic activities, usually the sale of different kinds of goods, either simultaneously, or by season, or combining selling and hairdressing. A girl aged 18 from Matete Commune described her activities:

The mornings, I get up, go get some bread, return to sell it and then I relax. A client might call me and I will go to do her braids. Braiding gives me a revenue of 2000 Fc each head. For the bread... I

get a salary at the end of the month depending on how much I have sold. I deliver bread to my clients in the morning, and in the evenings, I get my money. I also sometimes do sewing.”.

A minority of girls and young women said that they earned income by engaging in sex work or transactional sex. This seemed to be because they have no family or others to give them economic support – either because they have migrated alone to the city, been orphaned or rejected by their parents or other family - or when their own parents expect them to bring home money to contribute to household costs. Just as in many other contexts around the world, transactional sex is a common survival activity resorted to by vulnerable girls and young women. An adolescent girl aged 17 from Mont-Ngafula Commune said:

Regarding sexual relations, I have already known five men. The three first ones obliged me to have sexual relations with them before giving me money or meeting my needs. I did it because I don't have a choice. The fourth behaved very badly, dressed badly, was brutal ...It is with my current boyfriend that I find compatibility and understanding.

Many adolescent and adult interviewees reported that engagement in sex work or transactional sex to earn an income is more common than the interviews with girls and young women suggest, and that there is significant underreporting of these activities given the stigma attached to this.

The majority of girls and young women interviewed produced a small profit, or retained some income from their own economic activities. Some saved small amounts of these earnings, and also saved money they had received from others. This normally involved using the informal savings mechanisms in the neighbourhoods (saving by card or via *likelemba* savings and loans groups system) or via the mobile money services offered by mobile telephone companies (for example, Tigo cash, Vodacom M-Pesa). Whilst there are risks of loss of money with these mechanisms, adolescent girls and young women used informal savings facilities as a way to ward off frequent requests for money from others, such as family members or boyfriends.

There were relatively few examples of girls thinking about future investments; many dreamed about becoming successful businesswomen, but few have few concrete plans. Nonetheless, many girls and young women who earn their own money said that it gives them some ‘independence’ and that they feel ‘useful’. Other terms they used included ‘autonomy’, ‘dignity’ and ‘freedom’. These less tangible benefits of economic activities suggest how they feel themselves feel, but also influence how girls and young women are perceived within their 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. Some adolescent girls and young women had constraints placed on them by boyfriends, fiancés or parents - for example around their mobility, or whether and how they worked or sold goods. Furthermore, selling on credit is common in Kinshasa and there are significant risks of clients not paying. There were 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. In a fragile context like Kinshasa, with poor infrastructure and limited public transport, moving around the city can be particularly hazardous, requiring girls to negotiate crowds, small alleyways and poorly-lit spaces where few know them. In stable contexts, the presence of police officers may act as deterrent to petty criminals and antisocial behaviour, but in Kinshasa, there are limited numbers of state security actors and levels of confidence in them are low.

Those girls and young women who sell goods in public spaces and have to move around for their work risk 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 offer to 'help' an adolescent girl or young woman.

The decision-making power of adolescent girls and young women

Whilst most adolescent girls and young women have some power to make decisions in some areas of their personal lives, there are areas where they cannot decide independently, have to engage in significant negotiations, or have no say at all.

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. Nonetheless, some parents or carers impose decisions. In some cases, adolescent girls and young women work to contribute to school fees.

The majority of girls and young women said they can decide themselves what work they do. Most said that they can control their own income, although some said 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 about work for their daughters, such as asking them to sell certain products.

Adolescent girls and young women generally said 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 said 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 can decide when they want to get married and are expected to make the marriage proposal.

The majority of girls and young women said they can make decisions about sex. However, most saw sex as a risk, and said they have chosen abstinence before marriage. However, sex is a taboo subject, and girls carefully police their reputations around sex, so it is difficult to know to what extent girls and women were 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 adolescent girls and young women controlling where and with whom they go out. An important motive for this control is to protect them from the risk of sexual violence. Girls and young women who go out without 'legitimate' reason (that is, for school, work or church) can also be stigmatised, as 'good girls' who are expected to stay at home. By contrast, girls describe how their brothers and male peers do not face constraints to their mobility, and can decide when to leave their parents' house to rent or buy a house or land. Yet, adolescent girls and young women who leave the parental home before marriage are often assumed to be prostitutes. A 14-year-old girl from Selambao Commune said:

At a certain age, a boy decides to leave home and go to look for a job and a house to rent. The boy can decide to marry or refuse to marry. The girl does not leave the parental home before marriage. She would become free and could become a prostitute, her life gets ruined... parents don't like to let their daughter go.

Most adolescent girls and young women say they participate in making some decisions within the household, but are rarely able to do this within the larger family, or within their neighbourhood. However, whilst most girls and young women are able to express their views on many issues in the household, it seems to be only 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 adolescent girls and young women lamented the fact that they had limited dialogue with their fathers, especially in comparison to their brothers.

Adolescent girls and young women interviewed expressed different views on whether they would like to change the way decisions are made. Many 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 said 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 adolescent girls and young women say that family members have a positive influence on their lives, giving them ‘good advice’, (with the exception that sex and sexual health are too sensitive to discuss with parents, although often discussed with older sisters and friends). Family members were seen as helping them resolve personal problems, and supporting girls with their education and economic activities through advice, encouragement, and, sometimes, financial contributions.

Many girls and young women also spend significant time at church praying and participating in choirs, prayer groups and church youth groups. Church groups appear to be a social space in which adolescent girls and young women can engage in with the approbation of their families and communities. Participants expressed mixed views about the role of the church and its members: some talked about the guidance they receive through sermons and one-to-one counsel, hope and friendship; but others mentioned the constant pressure to contribute financially to the church, and the harsh exclusion of some young women, such as sex workers and unmarried girl mothers.

Adolescent girls and young women also spend time with school and neighbourhood friends of a similar age, mainly girls. Most stress that they only spend time with ‘close friends’ who give ‘good advice’, and that they avoid ‘bad influences’ of other girls—something talked about frequently by both adolescents and adults. Some girls and young women 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* (easy). Many girls and young women interviewed were still at school, and spend significant time there. Most talk about the positive influence of school as a place of learning and interaction with friends; yet several interviewed recounted stories of teachers who ask for money or sex from students.

Nearly all adolescent girls and young women interviewed regularly used at least one media source, and many combine different media for different purposes, including 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 do also listen to the news, especially about events in DRC. Some also listen to the radio, which is more accessible than TV.

Girls and young women had different views when it comes to access to the Internet and use of social media (girls primarily use Whataspp and Facebook). Many said 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 use social media to keep in touch with friends and meet new people, these networks are also seen as risky to girls' safety and reputation – and hence usage is likely under-reported.

What empowerment means for adolescent girls and young women

Understandings of 'empowerment' amongst adolescent girls and young women 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, various ideas around autonomy, agency, independence, capability and so on, and identified five different terms in Lingala which can be variously used to signify an 'empowered woman':

- (i) *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.
- (ii) *Mwasi amikoka*: a woman who is capable, independent and self-sufficient economically.
- (iii) *Grande dame*: a woman with high status and profile, who is capable, admired and valued.
- (iv) *Mwasi elombe*: a capable, ambitious and autonomous woman, who is self-sufficient, supporting herself and others.
- (v) *Elombe mwasi*: a dynamic, capable and powerful (including physically) woman, who does not necessarily conform to social norms, and is not necessarily praised.

For most research participants, 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. Adolescent girls and young women interviewed generally used the terms *mwasi malonga* or *mwasi elombe*. Most stressed that a woman should not be economically self-sufficient purely for her own personal gain; she 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, also stressed the importance of a woman conforming to society's expectations in terms of her behaviour i.e. being polite, respectful and *soumise*.

Most 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 stressed the empowered woman's journey—that to succeed she had to work hard and overcome difficulties. An adolescent girl aged 17 from Lemba Terminus Commune said:

When a young woman discovers herself, gets through difficult periods and finds that she has succeeded nonetheless, then she can say that she is a mwasi elombe.

In terms of role models and women who inspire them, adolescent girls and young women talked about their family members and neighbours, as well as women with a public profile. Participants commonly mentioned their mothers, aunts and older sisters, who they describe as *mwasi malonga* or *mwasi elombe*. Girls and young women 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. Participants 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 girls and young women could only 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 also said that they must avoid pregnancy before marriage and protect their reputation. The obstacles to empowerment cited were a girl or young woman'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, marriage is a necessary ingredient to become a '*mwasi malonga*'. Some adolescent girls and young women also think that their future husbands could help them with economic activities, giving them start-up capital and advice. However, some young women talked about how husbands constrain their wives, stopping them from working or limiting their mobility. A young woman aged 24, from Linguala Commune, stated:

It is the possessive man... the man who sees the woman as a baby maker, a housewife... not someone who can look him in the eyes and say 'not this.' My Aunt, for example, has a car and wants to learn to drive, but her husband insists on taking a chauffeur as he does not want to see her at the wheel... why? He does not want to see an emancipated woman who can take the steering wheel and go anywhere without him knowing... It is men who are a brake on women's emancipation.

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*'. Most adolescent girls and young women interviewed 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 and young women 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 adolescent girls and young women have work aspirations linked to their desires to help others. An adolescent girl aged 15, from Masina Commune said:

Like Maman Olive Kabila... because she has the heart to come and help those who suffer. I would like to open schools, churches, hospitals. Also become a fashion designer. People help me and I would like to do the same for others.

A few spoke in general terms about becoming rich, famous and a '*grande dame*', who is powerful, wealthy, able to travel, well-known and respected in the community.

Implications for policymakers, practitioners and researchers

Many of the daily realities, challenges and aspirations of the Congolese adolescent girls and young women interviewed in this study might seem typical of those of young women in African cities. The expectations they face as they reach puberty in terms of bringing in an income and navigating frequent sexual advances are also present in other contexts. The relative freedoms accorded to their

brothers and male peers in comparison to the restrictions they often face around their mobility and conduct are also common elsewhere.

However, what is striking in the fragile urban environment of Kinshasa is the extent of the gap between expectations and realities for adolescent girls and young women. This is a tough environment, with a state which can be both absent and predatory, a severe lack of economic opportunities, and ever-increasing competition over scarce resources as more migrants arrive in the city's unplanned suburbs. A large proportion of the city's inhabitants are preoccupied with their daily survival, and those who are beyond this are concerned about how to stabilise their position so they can maintain the access to resources, services and status they have obtained.

Life is precarious and in constant flux here, and there are few if any safety nets. Perhaps this is partly why there is a tendency for many *Kinois* – including girls and young women themselves - to hold onto many traditional values and expectations about how young women should behave as a kind of coping mechanism. Yet, this is creating immense pressure on young women who are living in insecure, challenging physical environments, and sometime entirely on their own. They are at once subject to stringent social norms and high expectations that they will bring in an income (whilst avoiding the multiple risks that this entails), find time and resources to study, contribute to the domestic work, and all along remain submissive and well-behaved 'good girls'. Young women know that there is no plan B for them, that if they slip up, they will be branded as one of the 'bad girls' renowned in their neighbourhoods, with serious implications for their prospects.

This research asked what 'empowerment' means to adolescent girls and young women in this context and what kind of interventions might support them to improve their status and wellbeing. The findings show that firstly, the starting point for all interventions is to ensure they are aligned with adolescent girls and young women's own realities, priorities and aspirations. Most of the participants in this study had an acute awareness of the risks and opportunities they faced and how to navigate these.

Secondly, it is clear that programmes that focus too narrowly on individual economic empowerment and autonomy, without ensuring that the girls and women targeted are able to remain integrated into their social environment, could increase risks for them. Girls and women need to be given the latitude, and where needed, supported to obtain the wider knowledge and skills they need, to tailor and shape any economic opportunities to fit their social realities.

Thirdly, whilst some of the experiences of girls and young women cut across differences in age, class and family situations, others are particular to certain groups, such as *filles-mères*, who often face higher risks and suffer greater exclusion. Interventions will need careful targeting and adaptation to respond to the specific needs and priorities of particular vulnerable groups.

Fourthly, the findings of this study support the propositions of Anne-Marie Golla et al (2011) and others that a multi-level approach is needed, combining work with individual girls and young women 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.

This research suggests that combinations of the following interventions could be considered: supporting individual AGYW to build business and entrepreneurship skills; providing improved loans and savings mechanisms; improving sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services; helping to foster girls and young women's positive relationships within and outside the family, through encouraging family dialogue and supportive familial relationships, developing safe social spaces for girls and young outside the home; working to shift social norms through campaigns that portray more

realistic and varied images of girls and young women; and working with the institutions (e.g. formal and informal education, religious institutions) with which girls and young women engage, to ensure they are supportive, inclusive and safe.

Finally, the experience of the *La Pépinière* team in setting up the Girl-Led Research Unit (GLRU) clearly demonstrates the value of including adolescent girls and young women in the development and implementation of locally-relevant research, and suggests that they can and should play key roles in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes intended to benefit them. This is likely to be the most effective way to support adolescent girls and young women to benefit from opportunities, manage risks and forge their own journeys of empowerment.

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Endnotes

[1] Whilst the average poverty rate in the city-province is lower than the other ten provinces of DRC, it is still high, at 41.6 per cent (UNDP 2009: px)

[2] See Lutrell et al (2009) for useful definitions of different areas of empowerment: ‘Social empowerment’ = increased confidence and happiness, control over decision-making, awareness of services. ‘Psychological empowerment’ = ability to challenge perceptions at household or community level; increased self-esteem, sense of autonomy; increased status and dignity. ‘Political empowerment’ = knowledge of legal and political processes, involvement in formal decision-making processes, participation in movements, collective action.

[3] This process comprised: (i) Weekly analysis of their interview transcripts by the girl researchers in the weekly mentoring meetings; (ii) Notes taken by the Research Mentors of the group discussions during the mentoring meetings; (iii) Coding and thematic analysis of all the interview transcripts by the international research team; (iv) Two data analysis workshops between the research team and girl researchers to discuss and synthesise findings; (v) A final validation workshop where the girl researchers presented the findings to the wider *La Pépinière* team.

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