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Forging Their Path: Embodied Agency Among Adolescent Girls in Zvishavane's Mining District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Adolescent girls' agency is vital for achieving positive educational, health, and socio-economic outcomes, yet it is constrained by intersecting social, cultural, and structural factors. This study examines how adolescent girls in Zvishavane, a mining district in Zimbabwe, embody agency to navigate everyday challenges. Guided by feminist research approaches, this participatory study amplifies girls' voices and lived experiences. Using a qualitative design, data were collected from 29 girls aged 10–19. Sixteen girls participated in individual interviews, while 13 took part in two age-banded focus group discussions for girls aged 10–14 and 15–19; the same 13 girls completed community mapping exercises. Six key stakeholders, including political, educational, religious, and health leaders, were interviewed separately to provide contextual and comparative insights. Thematic analysis identified key dimensions of agency, including personal attributes, skills, knowledge, access to resources, and embodied experiences. The findings revealed that girls exercise agency through self-discipline, moral reasoning, critical thinking, financial independence, relational negotiation, and bodily autonomy. Despite pervasive poverty, gender-based violence, and restrictive norms, girls navigate risks through resilience, strategic decision-making, and engagement with supportive networks. Agency is informed by cultural values such as Ubuntu and relational responsibilities. Overall, this study demonstrates that adolescent girls in marginalised mining communities are capable of forging pathways towards self-determination and empowerment and that supporting embodied agency is critical to enabling their long-term well-being and societal participation. This study contributes to an understanding of adolescent agency as embodied, relational, and context-specific. The implications include integrating culturally grounded ethics into empowerment programmes, expanding entrepreneurship and digital literacy initiatives, institutionalising mentorship and psychosocial support, and creating safe spaces for girls' voices. Intersectional and comparative studies of adolescent agency, as well as longitudinal studies tracking how agency develops over time, could deepen understanding of embodied agency and provide evidence for more effective, contextually informed policies and programmes.

Keywords: adolescent girls; agency; embodiment; mining; feminism; Ubuntu

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1. Introduction

Across the globe, adolescent girls are navigating complex transitions shaped by gender norms, poverty, education systems, digital technologies, climate crises, and evolving social expectations. Within development and gender scholarship, agency has emerged as a critical construct for understanding how girls make decisions, express voice, negotiate constraints, and shape their futures. Contemporary research conceptualises agency as multidimensional

and contextually embedded, often measured through domains such as decision-making power, voice, and mobility or freedom of movement [1–4]. These dimensions evolve with age, social positioning, and lived experience, underscoring agency not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic capacity continuously shaped by social environments [5].

Nevertheless, the exercise of agency remains deeply uneven. Social and gender norms continue to regulate girls' bodies, sexuality, mobility, and aspirations, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where structural inequalities intersect with poverty and limited service provision [6–8]. Restrictive norms around femininity, respectability, and obedience often curtail girls' autonomy in education, relationships, and reproductive decision-making, while exposure to violence and unsafe public spaces further constrains their freedom [9,10]. Although interventions such as life-skills training, empowerment programming, and digital literacy initiatives show promise in improving educational retention as well as sexual and reproductive health outcomes, their effects remain modest, context-dependent, and insufficiently responsive to structural barriers [11–14].

This article is explicitly grounded in an African feminist lens that reads agency as embodied, relational, negotiated, and situated within unequal structures rather than as a purely individual capacity for autonomous choice. This lens brings together feminist critiques of narrow agency measurement, embodiment theory, and African feminist epistemologies to foreground how girls experience power through their bodies, relationships, moral worlds, and everyday practices. A robust feminist critique challenges the predominant measurement of agency through narrow survey instruments, which often ignore lived experience, embodiment, and cultural meaning-making [2–4]. In response, feminist scholars increasingly advocate for qualitative, context-sensitive methodologies that centre girls' own voices, relational negotiations, and everyday practices. This is especially vital in marginalised settings, where patriarchal structures often shape agency into subtle forms of endurance, strategic silence, or incremental self-making, rather than overt resistance [15–17]. African feminist epistemologies deepen this critique by rejecting Western liberal ideals of isolated autonomy. Instead, they foreground relational personhood, moral agency, and community-embedded selfhood, framing agency not as mere individual choice but as a practice of navigating social obligations, respectability, and survival within constrained environments [17–19].

Directly engaging these theoretical and empirical imperatives, this study examines how adolescent girls in Zvishavane, a Zimbabwean mining district characterised by economic precarity, gendered violence, and environmental stress, embody agency in their daily lives. Such mining towns present volatile social ecologies where labour migration, informal economies, and disrupted norms heighten exploitation, yet also paradoxically generate new spaces for girls' negotiation and self-formation. Despite these complex realities, little research has centred girls' own understandings of their agency within such constrained and dynamic contexts in Zimbabwe.

This study is guided by the following question: *How do adolescent girls in Zvishavane's mining district understand and embody agency as they navigate intersecting structural constraints?* As part of the multi-country Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency initiative, the Zimbabwe case contributes context-specific evidence from an under-researched mining community. It shows how agency is expressed through embodied self-regulation, relational negotiation, moral reasoning, livelihood practices, and the navigation of spatial risk within conditions of economic precarity and gendered violence. These findings extend the wider LAAGA inquiry by demonstrating that agency cannot be understood only through standardised indicators of voice, decision-making, or mobility; it must also be examined through local moral vocabularies, institutional environments, and the material conditions that expand or restrict girls' room to act. This study consequently advances a

theoretically explicit African feminist account of adolescent agency while responding to calls for girl-centred and methodologically plural approaches that capture agency beyond standardised metrics [2–4].

This article proceeds from the Zimbabwean and mining-district context to the feminist methodology, thematic findings, and discussion. The conclusion and implications then synthesise how agency is embodied and identify priorities for policy, practice, and future research.

2. Background

Adolescent girls around the world encounter complex and context-specific barriers to realising their rights, aspirations, and well-being, particularly in marginalised settings. The *Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency (LAAGA)* research project constitutes a multi-country collaborative inquiry into what agency looks like for girls aged 10–19 in structurally constrained contexts across Bangladesh, the Kenya–Uganda borderlands, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe [20]. LAAGA adopts a girl-centred, comparative approach to unpack how adolescent girls perceive, exercise, and negotiate agency amidst intersecting forms of socio-economic exclusion, gender norms, and structural inequalities [21].

In Zimbabwe, the LAAGA case study was conducted in Zvishavane District, a mining area in the Midlands Province, where adolescent girls' everyday lives and futures are shaped by poverty, gendered risks, environmental change, and constrained access to education and services. Zimbabwe is a lower-middle-income country in sub-Saharan Africa with an estimated population of 16.3 million [22]. Despite progressive policy frameworks, including the Constitution of Zimbabwe [23], the National Gender Policy 2013–2017 [24], and the National Development Strategy 1, 2021–2025 [25], the nation continues to wrestle with persistent socio-economic challenges that stifle progress on gender justice and inclusive development. High inflation, stagnating agricultural productivity, climate impacts, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have entrenched poverty and widened inequalities, undermining the realisation of girls' rights and life chances [22]. As the National Development Strategy 1 recognises, gender equality and women's empowerment remain "unfinished business", particularly for girls in marginalised communities.

Adolescent girls in Zimbabwe are disproportionately affected by these intersecting vulnerabilities. The Zimbabwe National Adolescent Fertility Study [26] revealed that 25% of girls are married or in union before age 18 and nearly a quarter of girls aged 15–19 have begun childbearing. Unplanned pregnancies, limited contraceptive knowledge, early marriage, and sexual violence are cited as key contributors to adolescent fertility [26]. National data indicate that over 700 girls aged 10–14 gave birth in 2022 and nearly 5000 teenage girls fell pregnant during the COVID-19 lockdown period of 2021, a trend closely linked to increased school dropouts and reduced access to protective services [27]. These patterns illustrate a pervasive lack of decision-making power over reproductive and educational futures, a central dimension of adolescent agency.

Despite these structural challenges, pockets of resilience and adaptive action are evident. Some girls exercise agency to navigate risks, resist exploitative pressures, and pursue livelihoods, education, and social recognition. Nevertheless, the forms and processes of agency remain poorly understood within Zimbabwean scholarship. This LAAGA study in Zvishavane therefore explores how adolescent girls themselves define, experience, and enact agency in a mining context marked by economic volatility, gendered risk environments, and normative constraints.

Zvishavane, a semi-arid district located approximately 97 km west of Masvingo, lies atop the mineral-rich Great Dyke and hosts several large- and small-scale mining operations, including Mimosa Mining Company, Shabani Mine, Sabi Gold Mine, and Murowa

Diamonds [28,29]. The district's population of approximately 85,035 [30] is characterised by significant socio-economic heterogeneity, shaped by formal mining employment, informal artisanal mining (makorokoza), and precarious livelihood strategies. While affluent suburbs associated with large mining corporations have well-maintained amenities, areas once supported by now-dilapidated mining infrastructure exhibit poverty, overcrowding, and service neglect [31]. Climate change has compounded rural vulnerabilities, reducing agricultural productivity, increasing water insecurity, and triggering male labour migration to these urban mining centres, often heightening girls' household burdens and risks [32,33].

Mining in Zvishavane produces stark contrasts: environmental degradation, hazardous abandoned pits, deforestation, and high levels of crime coexist with economic opportunities that attract inward migration [34]. Nomadic male miner groups, locally known as *MaShurugwi*, are frequently associated with violence and gender-based exploitation, contributing to unsafe conditions for women and girls [35]. High incidences of gender-based violence, child marriage, and informal transactional sex as survival strategies have been documented in the district and other artisanal mining hotspots [31,35]. COVID-19 further amplified these vulnerabilities by restricting access to social support services, disrupting education, and increasing girls' exposure to violence and early childbearing [36]. Together, these conditions produce gendered risk environments in which adolescent girls are simultaneously highly vulnerable and compelled to develop resourceful ways of navigating severe constraints.

Against this backdrop, adolescent girls in Zvishavane inhabit a socio-economic landscape shaped by entrenched poverty, extractive mining economies, gender-based violence, climate insecurity, weakened public infrastructure, and persistent patriarchal norms. These intersecting forces constrain girls' bodily safety, educational continuity, mobility, and reproductive autonomy, positioning their bodies as primary sites where structural inequalities are both experienced and negotiated. High rates of early pregnancy, school dropout, transactional relationships, and exposure to violence therefore underscore the urgency of examining agency not merely as a cognitive capacity but as an embodied process. Within this context, girls must cultivate practical and relational forms of agency to manage risk, sustain schooling, protect dignity, contribute to household survival, and imagine alternative futures.

Rather than applying abstract or universal definitions of empowerment, this research centres girls' own experiences to explore how agency is felt, interpreted, and enacted in daily life, particularly within the mining context. In doing so, it provides empirical insight into how adolescent girls embody agency to navigate profound vulnerability and forge pathways towards personal and social advancement. Such insights are vital for informing gender-sensitive policies, educational programmes, and community interventions that are responsive to the actual lived experiences of girls. Furthermore, this study seeks to redefine agency within development and feminist discourse, positing that true empowerment resides not in abstract concepts but in the daily acts of negotiation and persistence that characterise the lives of marginalised communities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Feminist Orientation

This study adopted a qualitative, participatory approach to explore how adolescent girls in Zvishavane's mining district understand and embody agency. The design was guided by African feminist and feminist research methodologies, which treat knowledge as situated, relational, and shaped by power. Rather than approaching girls as passive respondents, this study positioned them as knowledgeable interpreters of their own lives and social worlds [37,38]. This orientation was appropriate because this study sought to understand not only whether girls exercise agency but also how they feel, perform, negotiate, and make meaning of agency within gendered, economic, and cultural constraints. The

participatory methods, particularly focus group discussions and community mapping, were therefore not ancillary techniques but central methodological strategies for eliciting embodied, spatial, and relational dimensions of agency.

3.2. Study Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in Zvishavane, a mining district in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. Participants included 29 adolescent girls aged 10–19 years and six community stakeholders knowledgeable about the girls' social, educational, and cultural environments. Of the girls, 16 participated in individual interviews: 3 were in primary school, 9 in secondary school, 1 at university, and 3 were out of school. The remaining 13 participated in two age-banded focus group discussions: one for girls aged 10–14 years and one for girls aged 15–19 years. These focus groups included 4 primary school girls, 7 secondary school girls, and 2 girls who were out of school at the time of the research. The same 13 focus group participants also completed the community mapping exercises. The 10–19 age range corresponds to the adolescence category used by the LAAGA multi-country study and enabled the Zimbabwe case to examine agency across early and later adolescence without treating adolescence as developmentally homogeneous. Recruitment sought variation in age, schooling status, socio-economic circumstances, and household structure. The analysis considered how dependence on adults, mobility, schooling, access to resources, and decision-making differed across participants' life stages. Because the age distribution within subgroups was uneven, these comparisons were interpretive rather than statistical. Participants' ages are reported with quotations where that information is available and analytically relevant; where an exact age is not reported, the account is identified by the participant's broader study position without assigning an unsupported age.

The six key stakeholders interviewed included a female political leader, a youth chairperson, a health officer, a teacher, a female religious leader, and a retired police chief inspector. Their accounts were treated as contextual evidence rather than substitutes for the adolescent girls' narratives. Stakeholder perspectives were used to identify community norms, institutional arrangements, and perceived barriers surrounding girls' agency; to examine where these accounts converged with, differed from, or extended the girls' accounts; and to situate the Zimbabwe findings within the wider LAAGA inquiry. Their specific contribution was to show how girls' everyday negotiations were interpreted and shaped by the community, educational, health, religious, and governance institutions around them.

3.3. Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were recruited purposively to capture variation among girls of different ages, schooling statuses, and socio-economic contexts, consistent with qualitative approaches to generating rich, contextually grounded accounts [39,40]. Stakeholders were purposively selected because their community, educational, health, religious, and governance roles gave them knowledge of the institutional and normative environment in which girls exercised agency. Their accounts were not used to speak for the girls or to establish the girls' experiences independently. Instead, they provided contextual and comparative material against which the girls' narratives could be examined, including points of convergence, divergence, and institutional explanation.

3.4. Data Collection Methods

This study used three participatory activities comprising individual interviews, focus group discussions, and community mapping to elicit girls' understandings and definitions of agency and explore the personal, relational, situational, and structural conditions that enabled or constrained its exercise. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted

in the girls' homes with 16 participants: 3 primary school girls, 9 secondary school students, 1 university student, and 3 girls who were out of school. These interviews generated detailed accounts of participants' personal experiences, decision-making processes, and perceptions of agency. Two focus group discussions were also convened during a church gathering and organised by age, with one group consisting of girls aged 10–14 years and the other girls aged 15–19 years. Together, the groups included 13 participants: 4 primary school girls, 7 secondary school girls, and 2 girls who were out of school at the time of the study. The group discussions encouraged collective reflection, peer exchange, and the shared construction of knowledge about agency within the community context.

Community Mapping: The same 13 girls who participated in the two focus groups also completed the community mapping exercises. In this participatory drawing activity, they identified community spaces that supported or threatened their agency and selected images they considered representative of local dynamics. Using the same participants enabled the maps to be interpreted alongside the discussions that had generated them and supported an embodied and spatial exploration of how girls navigated their environments.

Key Informant Interviews: Six community stakeholders were interviewed using the same semi-structured guide used with the girls. These interviews provided contextual and comparative evidence concerning community norms, institutional conditions, and perceived barriers surrounding girls' agency. Stakeholder accounts were examined separately and were not treated as substitutes for girls' narratives.

3.5. Data Analysis

All interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's [41] six-step framework: familiarisation with the data, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Girls' interviews and focus groups constituted the primary dataset for identifying and developing themes. Stakeholder interviews were examined separately and then read alongside the girls' accounts to contextualise community norms and institutional conditions, identify convergence or divergence, and clarify how adults and local institutions interpreted girls' agency. Stakeholder observations were not treated as evidence of girls' lived experiences unless the girls' own accounts supported the interpretation. Analysis was both inductive and theoretically informed. Inductively, girls' own terms, metaphors, and contrasts, including *musikana akarongeka* and *musikana akadhakwa*, were retained as analytic anchors. Theoretically, interpretation was guided by feminist agency scholarship, embodiment theory, and African feminist epistemologies, allowing the analysis to connect everyday narratives to broader questions of power, relationality, moral agency, and structural constraint. During theme development, accounts were also compared across younger and older participants, schooling status, and household circumstances. These comparisons were interpretive rather than statistical and were used to identify variation without assuming that older participants represented younger girls. Community maps were analysed as visual-spatial data and then read alongside interview and focus group narratives. Places marked as threatening or enabling were coded; compared with girls' explanations of movement, companionship, and avoidance; and used to interpret how agency was exercised through everyday spatial decisions.

3.6. Researcher Reflexivity

Consistent with this study's feminist orientation, interpretation was approached as situated rather than neutral. The research was conducted through adult-led encounters with adolescent participants, creating generational and institutional power differences that may have influenced what girls felt able to disclose in home, church, and interview settings. The

research team's theoretical commitments to African feminist and embodiment perspectives also shaped the questions asked; the attention given to moral language, relationships, and bodily practices; and the interpretation of agency as situated and relational. To address these influences, the team treated girls as knowledgeable interpreters of their own lives; retained locally meaningful terms as analytic anchors; compared interpretations across individual interviews, age-banded focus groups, and community maps; and analysed stakeholder accounts separately before reading them alongside the girls' narratives. These practices reduced but could not eliminate the influence of adult authority, institutional roles, and assumptions about respectability, vulnerability, and empowerment. The findings should therefore be understood as a co-produced account shaped by participants' narratives, the contexts in which they spoke, and the researchers' interpretive positions.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical clearance from the [institution name, redacted for review], with additional academic mentorship and oversight provided by the University of [redacted for review]. All procedures complied with established ethical principles, including voluntary participation, informed consent and assent, confidentiality, and the protection of participant safety. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents or guardians of participating girls and from the key stakeholders; assent was obtained from all participating girls. Authorisation to conduct this study in Zvishavane was granted by both district authorities and relevant religious leaders. Given the vulnerability of adolescent participants, particular care was taken to minimise potential risks and ensure that data collection took place in safe and supportive environments. These measures were implemented in accordance with internationally recognised ethical guidelines for research involving minors and marginalised populations [38,39].

4. Findings

This section presents how adolescent girls in Zvishavane conceptualise the embodiment of agency within the mining district. All participants acknowledged the challenges of living in a social environment such as Zvishavane, noting that they must contend with significant structural and social barriers in order to achieve their developmental goals. To survive and thrive within these constraints, the girls emphasised the need to actively embody agency in their everyday lives rather than merely possess it as an abstract capacity. They described the display and embodiment of agency as a dynamic and sometimes messy process of becoming, shaped by experimentation, negotiation, and resilience. In navigating these conditions, the girls identified five interrelated dimensions of embodied agency: (i) personal attributes and moral conduct, (ii) skills for economic and social navigation, (iii) contextual and self-knowledge, (iv) access to resources, services, and relational support, and (v) mindsets and belief systems that sustain resilience and aspiration. The section concludes by presenting the girls' own interpretive constructions and definitions of agency, foregrounding their voices as central to understanding how agency is lived and enacted in context.

4.1. Moral Character, Discipline, and Self-Regulation as Foundations of Agency

Participants consistently emphasised that agency in Zvishavane requires strong personal discipline, moral uprightness, and resistance to negative peer influence. Exercising agency was described as difficult in a mining town where girls are exposed to early sexualisation, transactional relationships, substance abuse, and digital distractions. A girl with agency was expected to be focused, firm, intentional, organised, and guided by a clear vision for her future, prioritising education and career development over early marriage.

Self-control and delayed gratification were repeatedly foregrounded. One 16-year-old metaphorically stated, *"a girl should not rush to pluck mangoes before they ripen… why not wait for the right season to get the juicy one?"* Early sexual engagement was framed as jeopardising future stability and marital readiness. Girls also highlighted responsible use of technology, warning against excessive time spent on social media and downloading *"zvinhu zvisina basa"* (useless content).

Girls' accounts connected moral conduct with the Shona concept of *hunhu*, reflecting Ubuntu values of respect, decency, and social responsibility. They emphasised respectful speech, modest dressing, obedience to elders, cleanliness, and dignified comportment. This interpretation was echoed, rather than generated, by the health officer, who observed that *"a girl who respects herself gains the admiration of the community and is able to ward off wayward boys or men."* Read alongside the girls' narratives, this stakeholder account illustrates the wider community discourse through which moral discipline is framed as a protective social strategy; it does not replace the girls' own accounts of how they understood or enacted agency.

However, the girls emphasised that, when their rights were violated or they experienced maltreatment or abuse by elders, they did not remain passive; rather, they asserted themselves by speaking out and taking action. A 15-year-old girl explained: "*I always insist on having my voice heard, particularly during family meetings. If I feel that my father is ignoring my needs and is being partial, I do whatever it takes, even if it means crying to get his attention*." A 17-year-old out-of-school participant who had worked as a housemaid described a more urgent form of self-protection: "*After the death of my father, I suffered emotional stress from my mother who used to drink heavily. When she remarried, things got worse with my stepfather verbally abusing me. I complained to my mother, but she chose to ignore me. When my stepfather attempted to rape me, I had to run away from home and stay with a distant aunt*." These accounts demonstrate different forms of agency: one participant negotiated recognition within the family, while the other left an unsafe household when adult protection failed.

Agency was also demonstrated through deliberate discretion in intimate relationships and everyday spatial mobility. In the community-mapping exercise, girls identified bushy areas, deserted roads, rivers associated with gold panning, mining pits, public drinking venues, and houses where alcohol, drugs, and commercial sex were common as places requiring caution or avoidance. These mapped locations prompted discussion of when and how girls travelled, who they trusted as companions, and how they altered routes to reduce exposure to violence, coercion, and reputational harm. Read alongside the interviews and focus groups, the maps showed that spatial avoidance was not an abstract preference but a situated practice of continuously assessing the social and physical environment. At the same time, the need to restrict movement reveals the limits of this agency: girls could reduce immediate danger without removing the unsafe conditions that constrained their mobility.

Girls further emphasised the personal attributes they actively sought to cultivate, such as ambition, confidence, independence, emotional self-regulation, social selectivity, and being "God-fearing," which they associated with moral discipline and protection from harmful influences. Overall, these practices reflect agency as embodied self-governance enacted through bodily discipline, emotional regulation, moral reasoning, and spatial negotiation, shaped simultaneously by cultural expectations and the imperative to manage gendered risks in mining-affected environments.

4.2. Skills for Economic Independence and Social Navigation

Economic vulnerability emerged as a major driver of girls' exposure to exploitation. All participants agreed that the ability to generate income was central to agency, as dependence

on men increased susceptibility to coercion and transactional relationships. As one 17-year-old explained, "*with money, men cease to be a girl's ticket out of financial problems*."

Across the interviews and focus group discussions, girls described livelihood activities that the analysis grouped into a diverse portfolio of income-generating strategies: providing laundry services; gardening; selling vegetables, cosmetics, and snacks; hair braiding; sewing; poultry projects; domestic work; and informal trading. The description of a "portfolio" is therefore an analytic synthesis of activities named across participants' accounts rather than a phrase used by every girl. Participant 3 explained, *"During weekends and holidays, I accompany my aunt to sell so that I can earn my pocket money,"* while Participant 10 described *"selling chips or French fries at high school"* and later buying and selling hair products at tertiary level. Girls also linked practical skills to reduced financial dependence. As Participant 1 put it, *"A girl should have skills like braiding and baking. If she makes her own money, [she] will not see boys as a ticket to end her financial problems."* Read together, these accounts show how girls mobilised bodily labour, domestic skills, social networks, and spatial mobility to reach customers and resources, sometimes combining more than one activity to stabilise income in volatile conditions. These practices constitute embodied expressions of agency through which girls negotiated economic precarity, household expectations, and gendered norms regarding appropriate work. At the same time, the small scale and informality of these activities demonstrate adaptation to constrained local opportunities rather than unrestricted economic independence.

Beyond income generation, participants emphasised transferable life skills for navigating complex and often risky social environments. These included decision-making, problem-solving, negotiation, communication, stress management, time management, critical thinking, and financial literacy. Participant 4 offered a concrete example: *"If she gets paid $50, she must not use it haphazardly on impulse buying but should plan on what to use it on."* Girls also described exercising decision-making in education. Participant 2 stated, *"I made my own decision on the subjects I wanted to study for my A level,"* while the second focus group similarly identified choosing school subjects and courses without being forced as instances of agency. These accounts show that skills were valued not abstractly but because they enabled girls to plan, defend preferences, resist pressure, and remain oriented towards longer-term goals. Agency therefore extended beyond economic survival into competence-based autonomy and relational intelligence within structurally constrained contexts.

4.3. Knowing Self, Risk, and Opportunity: Contextual Knowledge as Agency Capital

Participants stressed that agency requires not only formal schooling but also practical, locally grounded knowledge acquired through lived experience and social interaction. Girls emphasised the importance of understanding their worth, gender equality, and voice within households and communities. Knowing how to assert boundaries and how to say "yes" or "no" was identified as critical, especially in romantic interactions where girls often struggle to articulate consent and expectations.

Girls highlighted awareness of manipulation and material inducements as common forms of pressure and described critical judgement, boundary-setting, and social distance as protective responses. A stakeholder perspective from the Youth Chairperson contextualised this pattern by observing that some men identify and exploit girls' economic and emotional vulnerabilities. This account was used to illuminate the wider gendered environment surrounding the girls' narratives, not as independent evidence of their lived experiences. Read together with the girls' accounts of refusing pressure, choosing trusted companions, and avoiding unsafe situations, the stakeholder observation helps explain the relational power asymmetries within which girls exercised protective knowledge and judgement.

Knowledge of personal safety, ICT use, community risk patterns, and available support services emerged in girls' accounts as a protective dimension of embodied agency. Participant 8 said that girls should *"know the right people to consult for help,"* while the 14-year-old participant emphasised decision-making, problem-solving, stress management, and confidence in expressing feelings. Girls also described how knowledge was shaped by everyday conditions. Participant 6 explained that water collection before and after school could leave girls late, tired, and unable to concentrate on homework, and the 11-year-old participant identified irregular water supply and the difficulty of washing and disposing of sanitary materials. Community stakeholders contextualised these experiences by identifying institutional and environmental risks, but their accounts were not treated as substitutes for girls' testimony. Religious leaders foregrounded guidance and knowledge of unsafe places; educators emphasised combining formal education with practical skills; and community and law-enforcement stakeholders highlighted situational awareness and timely help-seeking. Together, the accounts show that protective knowledge was produced through girls' lived experience and supported, though not defined, by institutional perspectives.

Collectively, this body of knowledge operates as a form of *agency capital*, a cumulative resource that enables girls to anticipate risk, interpret power relations, and strategically access opportunities while avoiding unsafe spaces, relationships, and digital interactions.

4.4. Resources, Services, and Relational Support as Enabling Conditions

Agency was not conceptualised as purely individual. Participants highlighted the necessity of material resources, institutional services, and relational support systems. Basic needs such as food, clothing, sanitary wear, hygiene supplies, digital devices, and pocket money were identified as essential for dignity and participation. Participant 1 argued that schools should provide internet access and computers for learners without phones, while Participant 2 similarly identified internet access and a good education as enabling resources. The 14-year-old participant stressed that girls from low-income households often lacked food, education, clothing, and proper shelter, and both the 14-year-old and 11-year-old participants identified sanitary materials as an immediate need. School-going girls therefore required fees, textbooks, water, sanitation, and internet access, whereas out-of-school participants emphasised educational sponsorship, vocational opportunities, and resources to start small businesses. These accounts position material provision as part of the conditions under which agency can be exercised, rather than as an individual attribute that girls can generate through determination alone.

"Sanitary pads are too expensive, and many girls cannot afford to buy them," complained the girls. "Making use of torn clothing and other handmade reusable pads is not comfortable, especially in the absence of water and girl-friendly toilets at school," said a girl aged 13.

The testimony of the 13-year-old participant illustrates how agency in early adolescence remained closely tied to adult-controlled institutions and basic material provision. Her concern with sanitary materials, water, and suitable school toilets locates decision-making within conditions she could identify and articulate but could not independently change. By contrast, older participants more often discussed income generation, intimate relationships, household voice, and future-oriented choices. This contrast does not establish fixed age categories, but it indicates that embodied agency shifted with schooling, dependence, mobility, and access to resources. Younger girls' agency was more visibly relational and institutionally mediated, whereas older girls described a wider, though still constrained, range of economic and interpersonal negotiation.

Psychosocial support was equally emphasised. Churches and community programmes were seen as spaces for counselling, skills training, spiritual development, and time-use discipline. Focus groups and study groups facilitated peer learning, business idea sharing,

and academic preparation. Importantly, girls valued supportive relationships with parents, teachers, relatives, and female role models who provide guidance, emotional safety, and accountability.

Girls' emphasis on help-seeking and trusted support was contextualised by the female religious leader, who advised that life *in* the *community* could *be stressful* and that *girls should know where to* obtain help *and how to manage stress*. This stakeholder perspective corroborated the institutional importance of counselling and referral pathways identified in the girls' accounts; it was not treated as a substitute for their experiences. Its contribution lies in showing how community-based institutions may either widen or restrict the practical support available when girls attempt to act on their own decisions.

These findings underscore agency as relationally scaffolded, dependent on enabling ecosystems rather than isolated personal willpower.

4.5. Mindsets, Beliefs, and Future Orientation (Psychological Resilience)

Participants articulated agency as rooted in positive thinking, resilience, spirituality, and future orientation. Participant 1 described the necessary outlook as *"Believe I can do all things," "never giving up in life,"* and remaining positive despite difficulty. Participant 7 similarly defined agency as *"to believe in oneself, to be able to stand on what one believes in [and] to be able to make own decisions."* Age-specific accounts revealed how these aspirations were expressed at different stages. The 17-year-old out-of-school participant spoke of *"accepting the situation currently but aiming high in life, believing you can make it in life,"* whereas the 14-year-old participant said, *"girls are not supposed to feel inferior to boys; they should believe in themselves and pursue their dreams."* These voices portray agency not as optimism detached from circumstance but as a disciplined future orientation maintained amid disrupted schooling, poverty, and restricted opportunities.

Across the two age-banded focus group discussions, one involving girls aged 10–14 years and the other girls aged 15–19 years, participants asserted, *"Adolescent girls should intentionally develop constructive attitudes, thinking patterns and belief systems that enable them to reach their goals despite the challenging environments."* A university participant reflected, *"I hold my beliefs, dreams and aspirations firmly and will not compromise just to please or be accepted by others."* These narratives illustrate that agency was understood not only as an immediate response to adversity but also as sustained future orientation, delayed gratification, and refusal to allow difficult circumstances to define one's trajectory. Because the first statement reflects discussion across the focus group material rather than an individually attributed account, it is presented at group level without assigning an unsupported exact age.

Girls also described seeing themselves as potential role models, leaders, and agents of change, capable of inspiring peers and contributing to community development. Spirituality played a dual role in this process. According to the girls, it functioned as a moral compass, reinforcing self-discipline and ethical decision-making, and as an emotional coping mechanism, sustaining optimism and psychological resilience. In this way, spirituality, hope, and aspiration were embodied practices that informed everyday conduct, relational engagement, and strategic choices.

This dimension positions agency as a form of *psychological resilience grounded in moral conviction and aspirational identity.* Agency therefore emerges not solely through visible action but also through the cultivation of disciplined thought, moral reasoning, spiritual grounding, and enduring optimism, which shape both present decisions and future trajectories.

4.6. Understanding Embodiment of Agency Through Contrast: "Musikana Akarongeka" Versus "Musikana Akadhakwa"

Girls articulated their understanding of agency by contrasting purposeful self-direction with disorganisation and vulnerability to influence. In Shona, a girl without agency was described as *musikana akadhakwa*, literally a "drunkard girl", symbolising impulsivity, lack of direction, poor self-care, and susceptibility to manipulation. This contrast was reflected in the participants' own definitions. Participant 8 described agency as *"being self-sufficient in decision-making and being responsible for one's life without having to blame people"*, while Participant 7 defined it as being able *"to stand on what one believes in"*, make one's own decisions and exercise control over one's body and life circumstances. Read together, these accounts show that the contrast between *musikana akadhakwa* and *musikana akarongeka* was grounded in girls' emphasis on responsibility, self-awareness, bodily control, and deliberate choice rather than imposed solely through the authors' interpretation.

Conversely, a girl with agency is described locally as *musikana akarongeka*, literally a girl who embodies orderliness or a girl who is well-organised. This concept encompasses a constellation of attributes, including good self-conduct, proactiveness, practical wisdom, integrity, initiative, resilience, goal orientation, diligence, focus, financial responsibility, discernment in friendships, and moral consistency. Such a girl is not only organised and capable of prioritising effectively but also speaks with confidence, maintains dignity, makes constructive life choices, and persists despite obstacles. Agency, in this framing, is therefore expressed visibly through everyday practices, bodily presentation, relational interactions, and decision-making patterns, reflecting the integration of moral, cognitive, and practical capacities in shaping a purposeful and self-directed life.

4.7. Girls' Definition of Agency: Agency as Thinking, Doing, and Becoming

Drawing these accounts together, girls defined agency as an integrated process of thinking, acting, deciding, and becoming. Participant 8 described it as *"being self-sufficient in decision-making and being responsible for one's life without having to blame people"*, while Participant 7 emphasised standing by one's convictions, making one's own decisions, and having control over one's body and life circumstances. Focus group participants translated these principles into everyday practices: choosing supportive friends, resisting peer pressure, continuing in school, selecting subjects or courses, speaking about unfair treatment, and delaying intimate relationships to concentrate on their studies. Agency was therefore framed as deliberate, future-oriented action exercised within constrained resources and relationships.

Analytically, agency emerges as embodied competence, moral identity, and the strategic navigation of constrained environments, rather than merely as individual freedom or abstract autonomy. Participants conceptualised agency as a lived discipline of becoming, encompassing character formation, skill acquisition, knowledge cultivation, relational negotiation, and access to enabling resources and support. In this sense, agency carries both developmental and protective connotations. Developmentally, it enables girls to build capabilities, aspirations, and pathways towards education, economic participation, and self-realisation; protectively, it equips them to anticipate, mitigate, and survive risks associated with violence, exploitation, technological exposure, sexual vulnerability, and material insecurity.

Thus, according to the participants, agency functions simultaneously as a moral identity and a practical survival strategy, grounded in local ethical values such as *hunhu* (Ubuntu), while dynamically responding to contemporary structural pressures and emerging social risks. Synthesising these findings, adolescent agency in Zvishavane can be reconceptualised as a cognitively internalised, somatically enacted, morally guided, and relationally

negotiated process through which girls strategically protect themselves, cultivate dignity, and pursue future possibilities within structurally constrained and gendered environments. This reconceptualisation contributes to African girlhood scholarship by centring indigenous moral frameworks, embodied experience, and relational praxis.

5. Discussion

This study illuminates adolescent girls' agency in Zvishavane as a deeply embodied, relational, and morally situated concept. Its central theoretical contribution is to show that, in this mining context, agency cannot be adequately understood through liberal assumptions of individual autonomy or through narrow indicators such as decision-making, voice, and mobility alone. Rather, girls' narratives reveal agency as lived through the body, emotions, cognition, spirituality, social conduct, material practice, and negotiated relationships. Integrating embodiment theory, feminist agency scholarship, and African feminist epistemologies allows for a nuanced interpretation of how girls internalise, perform, regulate, and negotiate power within structurally constrained environments.

5.1. Cognitive and Emotional Embodiment: Developing an Internal Sense of Agency

Participants demonstrated a growing internalisation of agency marked by critical thinking, self-trust, and emotional regulation. Girls emphasised decision-making, critical thinking, self-discipline, resisting manipulation, and discerning trustworthy relationships. These findings resonate with feminist embodiment perspectives that frame agency as emerging through internal cognitive shifts and emotional maturation, not merely behavioural autonomy [42,43].

Girls' ability to recognise boys' manipulation tactics, evaluate risky spaces, and question peer influence reflects the development of a critical lens towards social norms and gendered power relations. This internal critique aligns with feminist pedagogies that view critical consciousness as foundational to empowerment [21,44]. Trust in one's judgement, expressed through phrases such as knowing how to say "no", speaking up in family meetings, and prioritising long-term goals, signals the embodiment of self-authorship and internal authority, a key marker of adolescent agency development [42]. Moreover, participants normalised experiential learning and resilience, emphasising patience, delayed gratification, and perseverance. Feminist developmental scholarship highlights that the capacity to tolerate uncertainty and recover from setbacks is central to sustained agency, particularly for marginalised youth navigating high-risk contexts [45].

5.2. Somatic Embodiment: Bodily Autonomy, Respectability, and Spatial Negotiation

Agency was strongly articulated through bodily regulation and physical self-presentation, including modest dress, hygiene, posture, respectful speech, sexual restraint, and disciplined comportment. These findings support embodiment theory's claim that power and agency are lived through the body as socially inscribed practice rather than abstract choice [43,46]. Girls' insistence on protecting their bodies, avoiding risky spaces, and maintaining dignity reflects a strong sense of bodily ownership and self-protection, even within restrictive moral frameworks. Bodily autonomy here is not expressed through sexual liberalism but through strategic restraint, spatial caution, and moral respectability. African feminist scholars argue that respectability politics can function as a protective strategy for women operating in unsafe public spheres rather than merely an instrument of patriarchal control [17].

The notion of *musikana akadhakwa* vividly illustrates how the absence of agency is embodied as bodily disorder, impulsivity, and loss of self-regulation. Agency therefore becomes visible through posture, cleanliness, voice modulation, emotional control, and spatial discipline. Girls' willingness to speak confidently, assert boundaries, and claim voice

within family spaces also reflects somatic confidence and presence, aligning with feminist work on voice as embodied power [42].

5.3. Relational and Negotiated Agency: Feminist Perspectives on Constraint

Consistent with Kabeer's [15] conceptualisation of agency as the capacity to define goals and act upon them within structural constraints, girls in Zvishavane navigate agency relationally, negotiating with parents, elders, peers, and religious leaders within economic constraints. Rather than outright rejecting tradition or authority, they strategically operate within prevailing social norms, balancing compliance with assertion to preserve legitimacy, personal safety, and access to opportunities. Agency, therefore, is not simply exercised as individual choice but emerges through relational awareness, situational judgement, and morally informed decision-making.

Mahmood's [16] theory of non-liberal agency offers additional insight into this phenomenon. Accordingly, girls' deliberate cultivation of discipline, prayer, respect, and moral comportment reflects forms of agency enacted through embodied self-formation rather than overt resistance. Their practices do not necessarily subvert cultural expectations but instead strategically inhabit them to protect dignity, safeguard well-being, and expand future mobility. This perspective challenges dominant Western feminist assumptions that empowerment must manifest primarily through visible autonomy or oppositional acts. In Zvishavane, agency manifests as adaptive negotiation, relational intelligence, and morally guided self-regulation, highlighting how young women exercise purposeful, embodied agency within constrained social and structural ecologies.

5.4. African Feminist Epistemologies and Ubuntu Moral Agency

The prominence of *hunhu* (Ubuntu) anchors girls' agency within African relational ontologies of personhood. African feminist scholarship emphasises that personhood is relational, moral, communal, and embedded in social obligations rather than radical individualism [17–19,47]. Girls' framing of agency as being "*a blessing and not a burden*" reflects this worldview by positioning communal accountability and moral contribution as central to selfhood. Agency is therefore understood as conduct that protects family dignity, social harmony, and communal respect.

African feminist theorists contend that agency must be interpreted through indigenous moral logics rather than through imported liberal paradigms [17,19]. In this light, the prominence of elders as sources of guidance underscores indigenous epistemologies, where knowledge is socially transmitted, embodied, and grounded in lived experience rather than confined to formal institutions. Practices such as respect for elders, spiritual discipline, humility, and the pursuit of social harmony are therefore not experienced as oppressive constraints; rather, they function as resources that confer legitimacy, safety, and social capital, enabling girls to navigate complex and precarious environments with strategic awareness.

Similarly, adolescent girls' spirituality, as expressed through faith practices, operates not as passivity but as an active resource for embodied agency. Spiritual practices provide mechanisms for emotional regulation, hope cultivation, resilience-building, and ethical self-guidance, allowing girls to sustain a sense of purpose and moral clarity amid uncertainty. These observations align with African feminist scholarship that recognises spirituality as both a site of empowerment and constraint, particularly for young women negotiating the intersecting pressures of social, economic, and cultural precarity [18]. Together, these insights highlight how indigenous moral frameworks and spiritual practices are integral to understanding agency in context-specific ways.

5.5. Knowledge as Embodied and Situated Power

Girls consistently emphasised the value of experiential knowledge, including understanding risky spaces, recognising manipulation tactics, accessing support systems, and using ICT safely, over and above purely academic or formal knowledge. This prioritisation resonates with feminist epistemologies of situated knowledge, which affirm the legitimacy of knowledge derived from embodied experience and socially situated practice [21,48]. For these girls, knowledge is not abstract or purely cognitive; it is actionable, protective, and deeply embedded within relational and environmental contexts.

Acquiring such knowledge enables girls to assert their voice, evaluate potential dangers, and strategically navigate opportunities, reflecting the embodiment of *epistemic agency*. It illustrates how learning is enacted through practice, bodily presence, moral discernment, and social negotiation rather than solely through formal instruction. In this sense, girls' knowledge becomes both a resource and a strategy, allowing them to anticipate risk, exercise informed decision-making, and mobilise support to sustain dignity, autonomy, and future aspirations within structurally constrained and gendered environments.

5.6. Collective Scaffolding of Agency: Beyond Individual Empowerment

The findings contest neoliberal narratives that reduce agency to individual determination or self-reliance, revealing instead a richly relational and collective scaffolding rooted in interdependent networks of support and care. Girls consistently highlighted the indispensable roles of material resources, nurturing adults, psychosocial support, peer solidarity, churches, and schools in enabling their navigation of precarious environments. Their agency is not expressed through isolated heroics but is cultivated, sustained, and amplified through these communal infrastructures, embodying African communitarian feminism's vision of empowerment as relational interdependence rather than solitary emancipation [18]. Girls' engagement in social networks embodies feminist praxis, combining resilience, mutual support, and collective well-being while navigating structural constraints.

These findings also complicate influential girlhood and development narratives. Harris's [49] distinction between the "can-do" and "at-risk" girl shows how neoliberal cultures divide girls into self-managing success subjects and deficient subjects held responsible for risk. Comparable expectations appear in the contrast between *musikana akarongeka* and *musikana akadhakwa*, but the Zvishavane accounts resist a simple binary: discipline and aspiration can expand room for action while also intensifying self-surveillance and moral judgement. Calkin [50], Moeller [51], and Khoja-Moolji [52] similarly caution that development frameworks can instrumentalise girls' education, enterprise, and self-improvement while leaving the structures that produce insecurity intact. An African feminist reading therefore treats girls' educational and economic aspirations as meaningful without making individual girls responsible for overcoming mining precarity, unsafe infrastructure, or gendered violence. It also clarifies the value of Shokeen and Switzer's [53] account of affective, micro-modal resistance: practices that resemble compliance, waiting, caution, or restraint may create limited spaces of autonomy, although they should not automatically be equated with structural transformation.

5.7. Navigating Tensions and Forging Their Path

The findings require a careful distinction among adaptation, negotiation, resistance, and transformation. Avoiding a dangerous road, regulating emotion, or selecting trusted companions can be agentic because these practices involve situated judgement and purposeful action; however, they primarily manage vulnerability rather than alter its structural causes. Speaking in family meetings, refusing coercion, or leaving an abusive household more directly contests interpersonal power, yet even these actions may depend on support-

ive adults, alternative shelter, and institutional protection. Transformative agency would involve changes to the rules, resources, and environments that organise risk, including safer public infrastructure, accountable institutions, and collective challenges to gendered violence. The girls' accounts therefore demonstrate meaningful agency without implying that individual conduct can substitute for structural reform.

This distinction also exposes the coexistence of vulnerability and agency. Practices of modest dress, self-regulation, religious commitment, and restricted mobility may reduce immediate exposure to harassment and protect social legitimacy, but they can simultaneously reproduce expectations that girls, rather than perpetrators or institutions, bear responsibility for safety and respectability. African feminist scholarship helps resist a false choice between celebrating these practices as empowerment and dismissing them as compliance. The practices are better understood as negotiated responses whose meaning depends on girls' purposes, available alternatives, and relational consequences. Agency in Zvishavane is therefore context-dependent and graduated: it becomes possible through knowledge, supportive relationships, material resources, and room to act but remains limited where poverty, unsafe environments, and adult authority narrow those conditions.

Simultaneously, internalised gender norms can covertly limit aspirations. Even without explicit discouragement, girls may self-limit their pursuits in fields such as leadership, STEM, or public visibility, subconsciously aligning their ambitions with what is deemed socially appropriate and safe for their gender. This internal landscape is shaped by subtle and cumulative messages about where girls belong and how they should behave. Critically, these constraints are not experienced uniformly. Intersectional vulnerabilities linked to poverty, schooling status, and community marginalisation intensify each layer of tension [45,54]. Therefore, for these girls, agency operates within layered risks. It is not a linear trajectory of increasing empowerment but a continuous, situated practice of calibration: weighing ambition against safety, expression against acceptance, and individuality against belonging.

6. Conclusions

This study illuminates how adolescent girls in Zvishavane's mining district understand and embody agency amid intersecting structural, social, and cultural constraints. Drawing on qualitative accounts, it shows that agency is not simply a set of behaviours or isolated decisions but is a lived, embodied, and relational practice integrating cognitive, emotional, somatic, and social dimensions. Girls exercise agency through disciplined self-development, moral reasoning, bodily autonomy, strategic decision-making, and negotiation within families, peer networks, and the wider community.

The findings further demonstrate that poverty, gender-based violence, restrictive social norms, and limited educational and economic opportunities shape the conditions under which girls exercise agency. Within these constraints, girls cultivate resilience, critical thinking, self-confidence, and ethical discernment. These capacities enable adaptation, interpersonal negotiation, and, in some instances, resistance; however, they do not in themselves transform the structures that produce vulnerability. African feminist epistemologies and embodiment theory illuminate how these capacities are internalised, expressed through the body and voice, and mediated by relational and spiritual commitments. Agency is therefore best understood as a situated practice of embodied self-making, moral negotiation, and relational navigation within unequal structures.

By centring adolescent girls' voices and lived experiences, this study extends scholarship on agency by foregrounding its moral, embodied, and relational dimensions. It also shows that interventions must move beyond individual skill acquisition to strengthen self-trust, resilience, and bodily autonomy while addressing the structural conditions that re-

strict girls' choices. Effective responses should therefore combine safe spaces and supportive social networks with measures that reduce material, institutional, and gendered barriers.

Overall, the findings present adolescent girls' agency in Zvishavane as dynamic, multidimensional, and firmly grounded in context. Girls make meaningful choices, negotiate relationships, manage immediate risks, and pursue educational, economic, and personal aspirations, yet their capacity to act remains bounded by unequal access to resources, unsafe environments, and adult-controlled institutions. Strengthening their embodied, morally grounded, and relational agency therefore requires supportive social networks alongside structural measures that reduce violence, improve infrastructure and services, and expand their legitimate room to act.

6.1. Implications

The findings of this study suggest several actionable implications for policy and practice aimed at enhancing adolescent girls' agency in mining communities such as Zvishavane. First, empowerment programming should integrate Ubuntu-based ethics, emphasising communal responsibility, moral conduct, and relational reciprocity while avoiding approaches that reduce empowerment to individual self-reliance. Such culturally grounded approaches can strengthen girls' moral reasoning, relational negotiation, and community engagement. Second, initiatives that expand micro-entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and sexual and reproductive health knowledge are essential to equip girls with financial independence, technological competence, and practical tools for navigating economic and bodily vulnerabilities. Third, mentorship programmes and institutionalised psychosocial services should be prioritised, providing guidance, emotional support, and role modelling from caring adults, including female mentors and community leaders. Finally, policy frameworks and community interventions should actively support safe public spaces where girls can practise voice, leadership, and mobility without fear of harassment or violence, enhancing both the physical and social dimensions of agency.

6.2. Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths. Its girl-centred, participatory feminist design positioned girls as knowledgeable interpreters of their own lives, producing accounts grounded in their own vocabularies, moral reasoning, and everyday practices rather than in externally imposed indicators. Combining individual interviews, age-banded focus groups, and community mapping allowed the cognitive, relational, embodied, and spatial dimensions of agency to be examined together and compared across methods. Including girls aged 10–19 who were attending primary school, secondary school, or university, or who were out of school captured variation across early and later adolescence and across schooling and household circumstances. Analysing stakeholder interviews separately before reading them alongside the girls' narratives strengthened contextual interpretation without displacing girls' voices. Finally, this study contributes context-specific evidence from an under-researched Zimbabwean mining district to the multi-country LAAGA initiative, supporting comparative analysis across settings.

Several limitations should also be noted. The small, purposive sample of 29 girls and six stakeholders from a single mining district means that the findings are not statistically generalisable, although they may be transferable to comparable mining and resource-dependent settings. The uneven age distribution within subgroups and the small number of out-of-school girls limited comparison across life stages and schooling status, while the cross-sectional design prevented this study from tracing how agency changes through adolescence. Conducting interviews in girls' homes and focus groups at a church gathering, together with the generational power differences inherent in adult-led research, may

have encouraged socially desirable responses, amplified moral and religious framings of agency, and discouraged disclosure of sensitive experiences. Finally, this study relied on self-reported accounts and did not include boys, parents or caregivers, or mining-sector actors, whose perspectives could further illuminate the relational and institutional conditions shaping girls' agency.

6.3. Future Research

Future research should build on these findings and address these limitations. Longitudinal studies could track how the cognitive, emotional, somatic, and relational dimensions of agency develop from early to later adolescence. Comparative studies across mining communities, including the LAAGA country sites, could show how socio-economic, cultural, and environmental contexts shape girls' agency and the effectiveness of targeted interventions. Intersectional research is needed to examine how age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and gender interact to shape opportunities, constraints, and strategies for resilience. Larger and more diverse samples, including out-of-school, married, or parenting girls; girls with disabilities; and girls in artisanal mining households, alongside the perspectives of boys, parents and caregivers, and mining-sector actors, would capture variation and institutional dynamics that this study explored only partially. Methodologically, peer-led, arts-based, and participatory approaches in neutral, girl-selected spaces could reduce the influence of adult authority on what girls disclose. Finally, intervention studies should evaluate whether culturally grounded empowerment, livelihood, digital literacy, and psychosocial programmes expand girls' room to act and address the structural conditions that produce vulnerability. Together, such research would deepen understanding of embodied agency and inform more effective, contextually grounded policies and programmes.

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