The development of agency in professional youth work with girls and young women in the Netherlands

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Abstract

● *Summary:* Young people living in north-west European welfare states are challenged to develop their individual strength. This is especially difficult for girls living in vulnerable circumstances, because they face a form of marginalization. Girls work is a method of professional youth work that supports girls in their identity development, making them more capable of shaping their own lives now and as adults. This is conceptualized as *agency*, which consist of the properties: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness,

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self-reflection. This paper examines the extent to which girls work helps girls living in vulnerable circumstances to develop their individual strength.

- *Findings:* The article is based on a questionnaire filled out by 393 girls who participate in 59 girls work activities in the Netherlands. This study shows that participation in girls work contributes to the development of intentionality of these girls ($F(3,387) = 4.60$, $p = .004$). Furthermore, girls who received an individual approach are better capable of reflecting on their actions than girls who only participated in group activities ($F(2,388) = 3.10$, $p = .046$).

- *Applications:* The findings suggest that participation in girls work contributes to the intentionality of girls in vulnerable circumstances, which is an important step in the development of agency. But to accomplish this, girls need to learn how to act upon their personal intentions. However, the findings do not show that girls work contributes to the other properties of agency, suggesting that to support girls in shaping their own lives, youth workers need to contribute more to the other levels of agency.

Keywords

Social work, youth work, women, social work research, quantitative research, identity

Introduction

Over the last two decades, governments in north-west European welfare states have been promoting “active citizenship,” which means that citizens are expected to take more care of themselves and each other with support of their social network (Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013). As a consequence, there is more attention in the field of social work for the development of “individual strength,” so that people are more capable of shaping their own lives, as a youngster today and later as an adult (De Boer & van der Lans, 2011). Reflection on how their lives will look like and the development of adult identity usually increases during adolescence (approximately from 12 to 18 years old) (Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollenbergh, 1999; Van Beemen, 2006). Most girls manage to do this alone or with help of their environment. However, for girls living in vulnerable circumstances this is especially difficult. These girls face a form of marginalization as a result of deprivation or of a lack of skills, capabilities, or opportunities (Metz, 2016) and contradictory role expectations (Batsleer, 2013; Merens, Hartgers, & van den Brakel, 2012).

Professional youth work is one of the social work professions in the Netherlands that focuses on supporting young people on their way to adulthood (Cullen, 2013; Metz, 2011). This work now includes contemporary aims regarding young people’s personal development and their “individual strength” and seeks to support youngsters in their participation at all levels of society. Youth work is

carried out by paid workers who were trained through formal education, peer learning, and experience in working with young people (Declaration 1st European Youth Work Convention, 2010; Metz, 2016). It is positioned in youngsters' leisure time (Metz, 2011) and focuses primarily on young people living in vulnerable circumstances (Declaration 2nd European Youth Work Convention, 2015; Metz, 2011). Youth work takes the lifeworld of young people as its starting point, which means that it starts where young people are (Smith, 2013). In practical terms, youth work offers young people a combination of urban culture and sport activities, the opportunity to learn skills and to obtain information and advice, practical help and individual guidance (Metz, 2013).

These youth work activities are attended more by boys than girls (approximately 10–30% of the youth in these activities are girls) (Gemmeke et al., 2011). This underrepresentation can be attributed to activities that do not appeal to girls, and to parents and caregivers who do not allow girls to participate because of safety concerns (e.g. because they are given in an unfamiliar neighborhood or because boys are present) (Metz, 2011; Valkesteyn, Bakker, Hilverdink, & Metz, 2015; Van Drenth & te Poel, 1991). Boys furthermore tend to dominate the youth work space through their more extravert and physical behavior, so that girls feel uncomfortable and stay away. In order to reach girls, youth work providers therefore developed the girls work method.

Girls work in the Netherlands is a gender-specific method of working with girls between the ages of 10 and 23 years within professional youth work. The aim is to support girls in their identity development, so that they are able to shape their own lives and to help them on their way to adulthood (De Boer & Metz, 2014). An important characteristic of the practice of girls work is that it involves an open approach method (Metz, 2016). This implies that the professional does not follow a fixed step-by-step plan. Rather, it involves professional interventions in the social domain with a goal-oriented, process-based, moral, and dialogical character. Girls work offers a great variety of activities or focus on themes which are more or less specific for girls (i.e. cooking, dancing, crafts, or just hanging around and talk about themes such as sexuality or self-image). Girls have a say in the kind of activities they want to participate in or the themes they would like to discuss. Therefore, girls sometimes choose the same activities as those which are offered in regular (mixed) youth work. What is different for the activities which are offered for girls only is that girls can explore who they are and what they think is important in their lives without the attendance of boys. There are two different types of girls work: the group approach and the individual approach (Van der Grient & Metz, 2018). When working with a group, the group usually consists of a fairly fixed group of girls who meet each other for a certain amount of time. The frequency with which groups convene ranges from once a month to a few times a week. Although the size of the groups varies, they usually consist of 8–12 girls. In addition to group activities, girls work can also offer individual support. The youth worker or youth work provider chooses one or both approaches

depending on the need of the girl, the context, the organization, and the assignment of the municipality.

Despite a history of over 100 years (Metz, 2011; Spence, 2006; Van Drenth & te Poel, 1991), little is known about the extent to which girls work accomplishes its goals. The main question of this article is therefore: Does girls work contribute to the capacity of girls living in vulnerable circumstances to shape their own lives? The research was conducted in close collaboration with eight youth work providers in the Netherlands. Girls who participate in girls work filled out an online questionnaire to measure whether they are able to shape their own lives. Shaping one's own life is conceptualized as Bandura's agency (2006). In this article we first present this theoretical concept of agency. Second, the methods applied by the study are briefly described, along with the setting in which this research was conducted. Third, we describe the results of this study to finally summarize the conclusions and discuss the purpose they may serve in the field of professional youth work.

Agency and girls work

Theoretically, the aim of girls work can be understood as *agency* (Boomkens & Metz, 2015). Agency is a theoretical concept that is gaining popularity in the social sciences, especially in relation to vulnerable people like those living in poverty and in relation to the position of women (Borovoy & Ghodsee, 2012; Charrad, 2010; Gonick, Renold, Ringrose, & Weems, 2009; McMunn, Bartley, & Kuh, 2006; Pollack, 2000; Samman & Santos, 2009; Tang & Anderson, 1999). Using the concept of agency, it becomes possible to investigate whether participation in girls work contributes to how girls shape their own lives.

There are different interpretations of agency. Agency can be defined as the ability of humans to act (Charrad, 2010). Others describe agency as the ability to make purposeful choices (Samman & Santos, 2009). McMunn, Bartley, and Kuh (2006) refer to agency as both having intentions to do something and acting upon these intentions. Most studies about agency agree that it pertains to making choices regarding one's own life and trying to act upon these choices (Bandura, 2006; Boomkens & Metz, 2015). Also, most researchers emphasize the role of people's social environment in the choices they make (Bandura, 2006; Charrad, 2010), and how girls cope with the limitations that social structures may place on them (Krumer-Nevo, Berkovitz-Romano, & Komem, 2015). Therefore, we understand agency in this study as the ability of individuals to shape their own life, in relation to their own values and in alignment with their own social context (see also Boomkens & Metz, 2015).

Agency consists of four properties (Bandura, 2006). The first property is *intentionality*, which refers to the intentional shaping of one's own life. Samman and Santos (2009) refer to these intentions as "making purposeful choices," while Borovoy and Ghodsee (2012) refer to "the freedom of women to do whatever they want." The next property, *forethought*, involves setting realistic goals and anticipating likely outcomes (Bandura, 2006). Borovoy and Ghodsee (2012)

emphasize that women, more than men, seek to make comparative assessments between what they want and what the consequences of their actions could be. *Self-reactiveness* is the property where intentions are converted into actions (Bandura, 2006). Most researchers emphasize this as an important part of agency (Charrad, 2010; McMunn, Bartley, & Kuh, 2006; Pollack, 2000; Tang & Anderson, 1999). Finally, *self-reflection* refers to how people reflect on their thoughts and actions (Bandura, 2006). When people reflect on their thought and actions, they can develop a clear understanding of their personal efficacy and of the world around them (Tang & Anderson, 1999).

This concept of agency provides a framework that helps to understand the potential contribution of girls work to the development of the individual strength which girls need to become active citizens as adults. It suggests that in order to shape one's own life as adults, girls need to develop all four properties of agency. From this theoretical perspective, we expect that girls' participation in girls work correlates positively with the development of agency.

Methods

We used a cross-sectional design to explore whether girls' participation in girls work contributes to their agency. We compared the degree of agency of girls who had participated for a longer amount of time with girls who started to participate more recently. Using a quantitative design, we were able to collect information about a large number of variables in a short period of time and managed to identify relations between different variables (Robson, 2011). Girls who participate in girls work offered by eight youth work providers in urban and rural areas in the Netherlands were asked to fill out an online questionnaire. Students and researchers supported girls with the questionnaires and, if needed, provided a paper version of the questionnaire. As there is no scale available that measures the concept of *agency* according to Bandura's (2006) theory, we constructed it ourselves.

The research was performed in close collaboration with youth work practice. Eight (previously nine, but two merged together during this research) youth work providers in urban and rural areas in the Netherlands opened their practice for data collection, arranged for at least two youth workers to participate in the *masterclass*, and the support of two girls who participated in the *girls group*. The reason for the collaboration with the masterclass and the girls group was to ensure that the research methods were appropriate to the girls work practice (Metz, 2016). This was important for two reasons: first, as a way to connect the knowledge, experiences, and questions of youth workers to our research; and second, as a way to make sure that the insights prove useful to the practice of professional youth work.

At least two youth workers per youth work provider participated in the masterclass. The task of the masterclass was to support the development of the questionnaire, to decide how and where data should be collected, and to inform other youth workers within their organizations. We consulted the masterclass to examine

whether the items met the criteria of agency, which resulted in some changes to the questionnaire. Together with their managers, the youth workers selected the activities to include in this research. Afterward, we presented the results of this study to them to validate our findings and together we sought to explicate and understand our research findings.

The girls group consisted of at least two girls per youth work provider who also participate in their girls work activities. We consulted the girls group once to present the questionnaire to check the following conditions: comprehension of the questions, attractiveness, and duration. Next, we tested the questionnaire twice with four different girls of the girls group, which led to minor adjustments such as the deletion or reformulation of some questions. Girls who participated in the girls group were treated to a goody bag and a collective dinner in return for their participation.

Sample and procedure

Approximately 80 girls work activities by eight youth work providers in the Netherlands were selected to participate in this research. Some of the data collection had been cancelled or rescheduled for a variety of reasons, e.g. sickness of the youth worker or participant, problems with public transportation due to weather conditions, a fight between the girls, and too much pressure on a youth worker involved in multiple selected activities. The 52 remaining girls work activities were visited at least once to collect the data. Only girls who participate in girls work were invited to participate in this study.

The data for this study were collected between November 2016 and February 2017. Girls aged between 10 and 23 were asked to fill out a questionnaire during regular girls work activities. The respondents filled out the questionnaire online with the support of trained students of several universities and researchers. Only when no internet was available, girls were offered the opportunity to fill out a paper version of the questionnaire. The youth worker was absent during the survey to reduce response bias. Respondents were offered a certificate and a wristband with the text "*girls run the world*" after finishing the questionnaire. Prior to the study, the youth worker informed the girls and their parents by letter and a flyer and gave them the opportunity to refuse participation by contacting the researcher or youth worker. Girls could also refuse to participate on the day itself.

All girls who were present on the day of data collection were asked to participate in the research. Although there are no exact numbers available of girls refusing to participate, the researcher knows that at least three girls refused to participate due to their lack of command of the language (i.e. girls who had lived only a couple of years in the Netherlands or because of their poor cognitive skills). Most of these girls tried to participate with help from the researcher or student, but the length of the survey made it too difficult to complete. Some activities were visited twice or more in case we did not reach at least 25% of the girls participating in that activity (due to a lack of time or girls who did not show

Table 1. Age of the sample.

Age	<i>n</i>	%
10–13 years	217	55.2
14–17 years	126	32.1
18–23 years	50	12.7
Total	393	100

up that day). Approximately 632–676 girls participated in these girls work activities. The number is uncertain due to incomplete registrations and weekly fluctuating attendance numbers. Of the 632–676 girls who participated in these activities, 435 girls completed the questionnaire (response rate of approximately 65%). In 39 cases, the online questionnaire failed to yield any answers because the participant did not press “send” or because of an instable Wi-Fi connection. Finally, we excluded three respondents who were younger than 10 years old. This led to the final sample of 393 girls (approximately 58%).

Table 1 shows that most girls who participated in this research were young girls between the age of 10 and 13 years (55.2%). The mean age of the sample is 13.68 years old ($SD=3.27$). Although 92% was born in the Netherlands, 74% has a mixed cultural background. From the girls attending secondary school, 72% follows vocational education and 28% higher education.

Measures

Participation in girls work was measured with two variables: the duration of participation in girls work and the intensity of participation in girls work. The duration of participation was measured with four response categories (less than six months/between six months and one year/between one and three years/longer than three years), while the intensity of participation was measured with three response categories (more than once a week/once a week/less than once a week).

We asked girls what *type of girls work* they were participating in. They could choose between the response categories: group activities, only individual contact with their youth worker, or a combination of group activities and individual contact with the youth worker.

Girls could choose an age between 10 and 23 years and were later split into three age groups (10–13 years, 14–17 years, 18–23 years).

Since we could not find a scale to measure the concept of *agency* (dependent variable) as defined by Bandura (2006), we constructed it ourselves. Based on Bandura, we operationalized the concept of *agency* in the four properties: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflection. Next, we generated 13 items to measure agency (see Appendix 1 for the translated scale). Items were measured on a five-point Likert scale from 1 representing “strongly disagree” to 5 representing “strongly agree.” Before we started the analysis, we conducted an

Table 2. Construction of the scale and subscales of agency.

	Variance explained (%)	α	Number of items	Minimum– maximum
Factor 1: Intentionality	25.2	.813	4	1–5
Factor 2: Forethought	11.1	.748	4	1–5
Factor 3: Self-reactiveness	10.5	.760	3	1–5
Factor 4: Self-reflection	7.5	.753	2	1–5
Agency: Total	–	.833	13	1–5

exploratory factor analysis (principal component analysis and direct oblimin rotation) of the responses of the 393 respondents to determine the validity of the questionnaire measuring agency. We examined all the factors evident when the eigenvalues are >1 .

Four of the factors were directly related with the four properties of agency. Factor 1 (intentionality) explained 25.2% of the variance. Four items were selected in the final subscale ($\alpha = .813$). Factor 2 measuring forethought explained 11.1% of the variance and also consisted of four items in the final subscale ($\alpha = .748$). Self-reactiveness (factor 3) was constructed by three items that explained 10.5% of the variance ($\alpha = .760$). Finally, factor 4 (self-reflection) explained 7.5% of the variance ($\alpha = .753$). To measure agency as a whole, we used these 13 items ($\alpha = .833$). See also Table 2.

The analyses were carried out using SPSS PASW Statistics 18. Age differences were assessed via analysis of variance (ANOVA). As covariates we controlled for age.

Ethical considerations

This study is carried out in line with the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Scientific Practice (VSNU, 2014). For example, participation in the study was voluntary. Prior to the study, the youth worker informed the girls and their parents (especially when girls were younger than 16 years old) by letter about the study, what participation in this study implies, and what parents or girls need to do if they want to withdraw from the study. To make sure that all the parents and girls knew about the study, posters were hung in the spaces or hallways of all participating girls work activities. The letters and posters were provided to the youth workers by the researchers.

The girls and their parents were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study by contacting the researcher or youth worker. It was also possible to withdraw themselves from the study on the day itself or even during the study. Anonymity of all the girls and the girls work activities which they attended was ensured, since no personal or impertinent questions were asked. The questionnaire only focused on how girls develop themselves within girls work and questions were

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of independent variables.

	<i>n</i>	%
Intensity		
More than once a week	82	20.9
Once a week	226	57.5
Less than once a week	83	21.1
Duration		
Less than six months	180	45.8
Between six months and one year	60	15.3
Between one and three years	91	23.2
More than three years	61	15.5
Type of girls work		
Group	227	70.5
Individual	35	8.9
Both	80	20.4

formulated in a positive way so that the study itself was not intrusive. Students, who supported in the data collection, signed a confidentially form before they could visit the girls work activities. The data collection was approved by the managers of all the organizations who participated in this study and the researchers have no conflict of interest.

Results

Descriptives: Participation in girls work

As described earlier, the mean age of girls was 13.68 years old (*SD* = 3.27). Although most girls were born in the Netherlands (92%), the majority have a father (74.3%) or a mother (70%) who was born in another country. Most of the parents who were born outside the Netherlands are from Morocco (in the 1970s a lot of people from Morocco migrated to the Netherlands as guest workers; today, second- and third-generation Moroccans are in a vulnerable position due to discrimination, low socioeconomic status, and living in deprived areas). A total of 72.5% of the girls live with both their parents and 20.1% live with one parent. Other residents live: alone (1.3%), “I have no permanent residence” (1.3%), with another relative (1.0%), in sheltered living (1.0%), with a partner (0.8%), or with friends (0.5%). Almost all girls attend school (primary school: 35.6%, secondary school: 56.2%) or have a paid job (3.3%). Of the girls attending secondary school, 71.9% follow vocational education and 28.1% higher education.

The questionnaire gave insight into how girls participate in girls work. Table 3 presents descriptive information about their participation. Most girls in our sample made use of a girls work activity once a week (57.5%). It is notable that a lot of

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the full sample and separately by age, duration, intensity, and type of girls work.

	Agency total	Agency properties			
	<i>M (SD)</i>	Intentionality <i>M (SD)</i>	Forethought <i>M (SD)</i>	Self-reactiveness <i>M (SD)</i>	Self-reflection <i>M (SD)</i>
Full sample	3.85 (0.53)	4.00 (0.79)	3.85 (0.69)	3.96 (0.71)	3.54 (0.87)
Age					
10–13	3.74 (0.54)	3.74 (0.81)	3.79 (0.72)	3.94 (0.73)	3.45 (0.89)
14–17	3.90 (0.49)	4.19 (0.64)	3.81 (0.60)	3.95 (0.71)	3.59 (0.84)
18–23	4.20 (0.42)	4.62 (0.46)	4.18 (0.65)	4.07 (0.62)	3.81 (0.78)
Duration					
Less than six months	3.79 (0.52)	3.81 (0.82)	3.84 (0.63)	3.96 (0.62)	3.56 (0.85)
Between six months and one year	3.78 (0.46)	4.09 (0.65)	3.79 (0.69)	3.82 (0.84)	3.29 (0.95)
Between one and three years	3.87 (0.60)	4.06 (0.80)	3.82 (0.81)	3.98 (0.78)	3.54 (0.85)
More than three years	4.07 (0.48)	4.40 (0.63)	4.00 (0.64)	4.10 (0.68)	3.75 (0.81)
Intensity					
More than once a week	3.91 (0.56)	4.02 (0.82)	3.95 (0.67)	4.04 (0.74)	3.60 (0.87)
Once a week	3.84 (0.53)	4.00 (0.78)	3.81 (0.70)	3.97 (0.68)	3.52 (0.88)
Less than once a week	3.81 (0.51)	3.96 (0.80)	3.85 (0.67)	3.85 (0.73)	3.55 (0.83)
Type of girls work					
Group	3.79 (0.54)	3.93 (0.78)	3.81 (0.67)	3.92 (0.72)	3.45 (0.89)
Individual	3.91 (0.41)	4.14 (0.66)	3.87 (0.72)	3.88 (0.59)	3.70 (0.80)
Both	4.02 (0.54)	4.16 (0.84)	3.98 (0.73)	4.12 (0.70)	3.79 (0.75)

girls in our sample had participated in girls work at the moment of the study for less than six months (45.8%). A total of 70.5% of the girls in this sample participated in group activities, where only 8.9% participated in individual girls work. A total of 20.4% used a combination of group activities and individual girls work. The masterclass confirmed these outcomes.

Agency

Next we measured the level of agency (see Table 4). The girls assigned a score for the level of agency with a mean of 3.85 ($SD = 0.54$), ranging between 2.14 (minimum) and 5.00 (maximum).

Respondents showed the highest level of agency on the property of intentionality. The numbers showed a correlation between an increasing age and level of agency, and applying to all four properties of agency. The level of agency also appeared to increase, the longer girls participated in girls work. The level of agency increased slightly, the more frequently the girls participated. Lastly, it is notable that girls who

Table 5. Outcomes ANOVA for the four properties of agency and duration, controlled for age.

	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i> (3, 387)	<i>p</i>
Intentionality	3	7.03*	2.34	4.60	.004
Forethought	3	0.36	0.12	0.26	ns
Self-reactiveness	3	2.10	0.70	1.40	ns
Self-reflection	3	3.92	1.31	1.31	ns

ANOVA: analysis of variance; ns: not statistically significant.
Note. *Adjusted R squared = .18

participated in both group activities and individual girls work showed higher levels of agency than those who only participated in one type of girls work.

Contribution of girls work to agency

The results from the ANOVA showed that, when we controlled for age, there is no contribution of the duration of participation to agency ($F(3,387) = 1.32, p = .269$). We did find a significant relation between age and agency ($F(1,387) = 22.19, p = .000$). This indicated no significant contribution of duration to agency.

Next, we carried out an ANOVA for each of the four properties of agency and the duration of participation in girls work and controlled it for age. Again we did not find a significant contribution of the duration to forethought, self-reactiveness, or self-reflection (see Table 5). However, we did find a significant contribution of duration to intentionality ($F(3,387) = 4.60, p = .004$). Girls who had participated longer showed more intentionality than girls who had participated shorter in girls work.

The ANOVA for intensity of participation in girls work (frequency) and agency showed no significant contribution of the intensity of participation in girls work and agency ($F(2,388) = 0.81, p = .447$). Furthermore, there was no significant contribution of the intensity to the four properties of agency. This suggests that the frequency of participation in girls work did not contribute to the level of agency.

Finally, we wanted to know whether the type of girls work contributed to agency (see also Table 6). ANOVA indicated no significant contribution of the type of girls work to the general level of agency ($F(2,388) = 1.63, p = .197$). When we ran ANOVA for the four properties of agency and controlled it for age, we found a significant contribution of the type of girls work to self-reflection ($F(2,388) = 3.10, p = .046$). Girls who participated individually ($M = 3.70, SD = 0.80$) or used a combination of individual and group girls work ($M = 3.79, SD = 0.75$) showed more self-reflection than girls who participated only in group activities ($M = 3.45, SD = 0.89$).

Discussion

With the present study we examined whether girls work contributes to girls' identity development, so that they are capable of shaping their own lives as adults. In

Table 6. Outcomes ANOVA for type of girls work on the four properties of agency.

	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i> (2, 388)	<i>p</i>
Intentionality	2	.02	.01	0.02	ns
Forethought	2	.63	.31	0.68	ns
Self-reactiveness	2	2.27	1.13	2.28	ns
Self-reflection	2	4.53*	2.26	3.10	.046

ANOVA: analysis of variance; ns: not statistically significant.

Note. *Adjusted R squared = .03.

theoretical terms, this can be described as “agency”: the capacity of individuals to shape one’s own life, in relation to their own values and in alignment with their own social context (Boomkens & Metz, 2015). Although we find a significant effect between the duration of participation in girls work and the level of agency, this effect is strongly influenced by the age of girls. This suggests that the development to maturity is an important predictor of agency. Young people usually start to think about who they are and who they want to be as adults (the identity development) around the age of 12 and this continues to develop throughout the adolescence (on average up to 18 years) and even into adulthood (Van Beemen, 2006). Therefore, the relation between the age of girls and the level of agency is in line with this development.

When we concentrate on the four properties of agency, we find a significant contribution of the duration of participation in girls work to intentionality, even when we control this effect for age. This result suggests that girls work contributes mostly to developing thoughtful intentions. An agent is someone who intentionally makes things happen through one’s own actions (Bandura, 2001). This means that forming intentions is a crucial step in the development of agency. Intentions are a representation of a future course to which people proactively commit themselves. The youth workers represented in the masterclass confirm this outcome. They explained that they support girls in the development of intentionality by discussing themes that relate to their future, so that girls are stimulated to think about what they want for themselves. The youth workers also mentioned that by talking about the future and the activities they organize, they try to motivate girls to change something in their lives. They also support the self-efficacy of the girls, by giving positive attention to individual girls and their strengths.

We also find a significant contribution between the type of girls work and the level of self-reflection. Girls who use a combination of individual and group girls work or participate only individually are better able to reflect on their motivation, values, and the meaning of their life pursuits than girls who only participate in group activities. This outcome suggests that an individual approach in girls work, rather than group activities, contributes to the development of their thinking and the outcomes.

Finally, no significant effect is obtained between the intensity in which girls participate and agency. This suggests that the frequency with which girls participate in girls work activities does not influence their level of agency. Since most girls in this study participate in girls work on a weekly basis, we cannot state with certainty that there is no effect between intensity and agency.

Limitations of the study

Although the findings in the present study suggest that there is an effect between the duration of participation in girls work and the intentionality of girls, our study has some limitations. The first concerns the use of a self-report survey. Although the scale for agency is reliable and we made sure that the respondents understood the questions correctly, it is still possible that the respondents see themselves differently than how they perform in practice or how they are perceived by their surroundings. Further research could investigate the level of agency as reported by the youth worker.

Second, we noticed that the 10-year-old girls ($n = 60$) and girls with cognitive disabilities had more trouble understanding the questions that measure agency. Although most young girls, sometimes with the help of the students or the researchers, did not have any problems with filling out the questionnaire, we doubt whether they could fully understand what the implications are of what they were questioned about. A qualitative study could help to better understand these girls' agency.

Since people usually start to think about their future around the age of 12, it is possible that some of the younger girls (between 10 and 12) have not yet started with developing agency. But because the target group of girls work starts with the age of 10 and youth workers focus also on their agency, we decided to include these young girls in our study, and to control the outcomes for age.

A third limitation of this study is the cross-sectional design. As the survey was conducted at one point in time, it is difficult to infer causality. However, this design indicates an effect between participation in girls work and intentionality. Future research should focus on this effect using a longitudinal design or a control group.

Fourth, this study operationalized agency as the ability of individuals to shape their own life, in relation to their own values and in alignment with their own social context. However, we did not interrogate the girls about the influence of their social context on their ability to shape their own life. Further research should focus on understanding how the girls' social context influences their ability to shape their own life.

Last, the results are only valid for girls work in the Netherlands and cannot be generalized to other countries. It would be of interest to replicate this study outside the Netherlands.

Conclusion

The current study contributes to our understanding of the contribution of girls work to how girls shape their own lives. The findings suggest that participation in girls work contributes to the intentionality of girls living in vulnerable circumstances, which is the first property of agency and an important step in the development toward active citizenship. The development of intentionality implies that the target group of girls work is better able to make thoughtful choices about who they want to be in life, instead of simply accepting the life that their social network expects them to have. When girls form intentions about their life course, they will proactively commit themselves to achieve this. For girls work, this means that there are strong indications that it actually contributes to how girls think about what will be important in their life as adults and who they want to be in society.

The study also suggests that girls work in the Netherlands at present does not contribute to the development of forethought, self-reaction, and self-reflection. This does not mean that girls work is unable to contribute to the development of these characteristics, but that contemporary practice is not very successful in this respect. For the further development of girls work in the Netherlands, it means that girls work should focus more on the potential consequences of actions and on helping girls to act upon their intentions. Finally, the study indicates that girls who receive an individual approach (in combination with group activities or not) are better capable of reflecting on their actions than girls who only participate in group activities. This suggests that in situations in which girls need to develop their self-reflection, it is better to use an individual approach.

Ethics

This study was not submitted to a research ethics committee, since the study does not fall under the scope of the Dutch Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO). In the Netherlands, only medical-scientific studies, and studies in which persons are subject to procedures and/or are required to behave in a specified manner, need ethical approval (Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects CCMO, n.d.). This was not the case in this study.

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Appendix I

Youth Agency Scale (original in Dutch).

We have developed this scale to measure the agency of girls between 10 and 23 years, who participate in professional girls work in the Netherlands.

	Strongly disagree	Mildly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mildly agree	Strongly agree
Intentionality					
I want to make my own decision about my future					
I want to make my own decision about my life					
I want to determine who I want to be					
I want to be responsible for everything I will do					
Forethought					
I consider in advance how to do something					
I think about what the consequences of my choices can be					
I take into account the possible consequences of my choices					
I think about what I can do myself					
Self-reactiveness					
I can be who I want to be					
I can achieve what I want to achieve					
I can take responsibility for my actions					
Self-reflection					
When I look back, I ask myself whether my expectations came true					
When I look back, I ask myself whether I have achieved what I wanted to achieve.					