



## POLICY BRIEF

Authors: Amita Vyas<sup>1</sup>, Megan Landry<sup>1</sup>, Nitasha Nagaraj<sup>1</sup>, Nidhi Dubey<sup>2</sup> and Richa Hingorani<sup>2</sup>

# Capturing adolescents' agency, voice and confidence through innovative research tools

## CONTEXT

The world, today, is home to the largest cohort of young people; nearly 1.2 billion of young people are adolescents aged between 10-19 years.<sup>3</sup> Prioritizing adolescents - their health, their education, their livelihoods and their opportunities - has been the focus of many development programs across the globe especially in low- and middle-income countries where 90% of these adolescents live. Adolescence is also when gender-based norms and perceptions are being cemented - all of which are likely to play pivotal roles in adulthood. Fostering gender-equitable attitudes towards one another, building their agency and voice are critical investments that can be made during the period of adolescence helping adolescents' transition into responsible adults. Being able to understand what positively impacts their mindsets and behaviours can serve as key inflection points for programming and policies and help design interventions that can conclusively build gender-equitable attitudes.

## CHALLENGES

Despite the well-acknowledged focus on adolescents and the gender norms they may hold during this time, there is a dearth of reliable and valid measures to assess when these norms are formed; how their gender beliefs and aspirations have a bearing on their empowerment. There is currently limited understanding and rigorous measurement testing that has been focused on adolescents in a South Asian context as most measures have been developed for adults in high income countries. Measurement of these constructs, especially in the context of a post-pandemic world, is pivotal to understand how adolescents-focused programming can be strengthened. Further, contextualized measures and tools are sparse and most only focus on Likert-type questions which report high instances of confirmation biases. Development of new survey questions utilizing storytelling, vignettes, as well as innovative data collection methodologies – all of which are more developmentally & culturally appropriate and engaging for this age group are imperative for programs/policies

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study constructed and validated scales for voice, agency, and gender attitudes amongst adolescent boys and girls in urban, semi-urban, rural settings in India and Nepal. To expand our understanding of adolescents' voice, agency, and gender attitudes, and their trajectories over time, as well as if and how interventions can change these constructs, it is critical that culturally and developmentally appropriate measures are developed for both girls and boys. From our data collection rounds in India and Nepal, six factors emerged from the analysis, closely intertwined to voice, agency, and gender attitudes. These are detailed below:

Factors and definitions	
Factor	Definition

<sup>1</sup> Department of Prevention and Community Health, Milken Institute School of Public Health. The George Washington University, Washington, D.C

<sup>2</sup> Global Health Strategies, India

<sup>3</sup> WHO adolescent health



Gender attributes	A direct comparison between boys and girls in which boys are considered to be more superior to girls.
Voice	The capacity to speak up and be heard.
Gender norms	Culturally shared expectations about the characteristics that men and women should possess and how they should behave. This includes socially acceptable rules about roles, traits, behaviors status, and power associated with masculinity and femininity in a culture.
Agency	Empowerment and the capacity to make decisions about one's own life and act on them.
GBV norms	Experiences of social norms regarding physical and/or sexual abuse of girls and women.
Self-efficacy	Perceptions on one's ability to organize, perform, and accomplish a given behavior.

***Given that six factors emerged from our research, it is likely that broad concepts of voice, agency, and gender attitudes are more nuanced, particularly for adolescent boys and girls in South Asia.***

## RESEARCH METHODS

For this study, the following research methods were used:

- Qualitative research was conducted to inform and develop survey items. A total of four focus groups with 30 girls and 25 boys between the ages of 10-16 were conducted in Delhi and Lucknow, India.
- Survey scale items were developed in both English and Hindi and face validity testing was conducted with 10 adolescents (5 girls and 5 boys) ages 10-14 in India. Comprehension, clarity, appropriateness of instructions and responses, and length of survey were assessed, and feedback from the face validity testing was incorporated into the survey to refine language, terms, instructions, and data collection protocols.
- The first round of data (n=460) served as the testing sample while the second round served as the validation sample (n=484). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on the first round of data (n=460) to determine the factor structure and examine if the three hypothesized factors emerged.
- The final instrument included 68-items and collected data on participants' sociodemographic characteristics such as grade, age, sex, and having female or male siblings. Thirty-three of the survey items specifically asked participants to respond to a series of questions by rating on a 4-point Likert-type scale whether they strongly disagree to strongly agree with the statements specific to voice and agency, gender norms, and gender attributes.
- The instrument also included vignettes i.e., real-life scenarios asking students to imagine themselves in various situations such as child marriage, marital violence, and girls' education and choosing option they feel most strongly about.

## RECOMMENDATIONS



- The findings presented here have **operationalized a set of measures that can be used with younger adolescents – both girls and boys - aged 10-15 years**, allowing future research to measure changes in these constructs through the adolescent time period, and to evaluate interventions aimed at changing these constructs during early adolescence. This provides tangible mechanisms by which programs that engage both sexes can measure outcomes.
- **Measures that are rooted in the cultural contexts** of the country where they are ultimately to be implemented **are critical in** conclusively assess adolescents' voice, agency and gender-equitable attitudes. Localising these measures are pivotal in being able to understand which programs work to strengthen adolescents' empowerment.
- In addition to the Likert-type scale, the **use of vignettes** i.e., real-life scenarios which prompt adolescents to imagine themselves pertaining to child marriage, gender-based violence, girls' education and choose options they feel strongly about **are important to corroborate the agency, voice and gender-equitable attitudes they may identify with.**