



Measuring agency, voice, and gender attitudes among adolescents in South Asia

Introduction

There are 1.2 billion adolescents, aged 10-19 years of age in the world, making up 16% of the world's population, and 90% of these adolescents live in low to middle-income countries. Across the globe, new programs and interventions are aimed at increasing adolescents' voice, agency and gender equitable attitudes. However, current measures for these important outcomes have been created and validated with older adolescent girls and women, and mainly in high-income countries. It is imperative that developmentally salient measures are created and tested with adolescents in low- and middle-income countries, and for both adolescent girls and boys. These new measures will offer insights into whether and how voice, agency, and gender attitudes change across this significant developmental time period and will equip program planners and evaluators with tangible ways to measure outcomes and impact.

Methodology

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 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. 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, were also leveraged to corroborate adolescents' perception on voice and agency, gender norms and gender attributes.

Results

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 exist, and for both girls and boys. The measures presented evolved from our previous studies evaluating a gender sensitization program for adolescent girls and boys in India, as well as formative research which led to the final structure confirmed by the EFA/CFA results.

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Although we originally anticipated three factors for voice, agency and gender attitudes capturing the dimensions we identified in the formative phase, six factors emerged from the analysis. However, all six factors-maintained dimensions of empowerment and are closely intertwined to voice, agency, and gender attitudes.

Final Factors and definitions	
Factor	Definition
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. For example, perceptions of gender attributes, gender norms and GBV norms loaded onto three separate factors reflecting that these are distinct from one another and should not be aggregated together under the domain of gender attitudes. It is plausible that adolescents’ perceptions of gender attributes, gender norms and GBV norms vary from one another, and an adolescent with perceptions of equitable gender norms could in fact have inequitable or negative perceptions of GBV norms or vice versa. Further, interventions that focus broadly on gender attributes or norms may not be effective at changing GBV norms among adolescents, nor may GBV aimed programs change broader gender norms or perceptions of gender attributes. Although these factors are interconnected, adolescents may not perceive these to be the same, and may have differential perceptions of these constructs.

Conclusion

Around the world, there is greater interest and focus on adolescent girls’ empowerment, and how voice, agency, and gender attitudes are critical factors that influence long-term change. This study developed and validated a set of measures for voice, agency, and gender attitudes that can be utilized with younger adolescents 10-15 in South Asia, and in urban, semi-urban, and rural settings. Further, the factors that emerged from the Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)/Confirmatory Factor Analysis analysis provide the foundation to expand upon different dimensions of voice, agency, and gender attitudes that are salient to adolescent boys and girls in South Asia.



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