

# If you speak your mind, they judge

Exploring opportunities for and  
challenges to adolescent voice and  
agency in the Gaza strip

Bassam Abu Hamad, Ingrid Gercama  
and Nicola Jones

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# Introduction

Children's right to participation, agency and a voice in decisions that affect their lives is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), but assessing whether children are realising this right in practice is complex. In developed countries, where childhood is typically conceptualised as occupying a different space than adulthood, there is an 'emphasis on voice-based forms of participation'; children's forays into active participation are deemed most important not for the outcomes they produce but because of the skills children develop in preparation for adulthood (Wyness, 2013). This is due, Wyness notes, to an assumption that children's other rights, such as to an education and adequate diet, are being taken care of by adults. This is demonstrably not the case for many adolescents in developing countries, and especially contexts shaped by fragility and conflict, where the boundaries between children's and adults' lives are less and responsibilities often overlap.

Understanding the agency and voice of adolescents in developing countries also requires a shift away from an exclusive focus on independence, recognising instead the interdependencies characteristic of many households in the global South (Hörschelmann, 2008; Boyden, 1997). Whether they are bringing in cash, doing domestic chores or looking after younger relatives, the contributions that adolescents make to household

wellbeing are, in and of themselves, an active manifestation of agency. In encouraging young people's future-seeking, and opening new spaces for their input, it is critical that analysts and practitioners alike take adequate account of how adolescents are already participating with their families and communities to construct socially meaningful futures (Bartos, 2012) so that all stakeholders can better understand and support adolescents in exercising voice and agency.

To contribute to this broader endeavour, this briefing paper summarises findings from participatory and qualitative research undertaken by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme in camp and non-camp settings with adolescent girls and boys in Gaza in 2016 and 2017. The paper explores the patterning of adolescent voice and agency in the Gaza Strip and the extent to which existing services and programmes are helping to support young people and address the challenges that adolescent girls and boys face in fragile and conflict-affected contexts like Gaza. The paper begins with a brief overview of the Gazan context and the research methodology employed, then discusses key findings based on four dimensions of adolescent voice and agency, before presenting conclusions and implications for policy, practice and future research.

# 1 An overview of adolescent agency in Gaza

Adolescents in Palestine face unique barriers to realising their full potential. The macro-level political economy context, including the protracted nature of the Israeli–Palestine conflict and the 11-year international blockade against the Hamas government in Gaza, has constrained economic growth, increased poverty, and reduced access to and quality of basic services. Repeated conflict episodes have exacerbated the problems and led to widespread internal displacement (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 2016; World Bank, 2017).

At the meso and micro levels, discriminatory social norms around age- and gender-appropriate behaviours further exacerbate these challenges. Strict age hierarchies common across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region dictate that there is little room for younger generations to participate in societal and family decisions (Pettit et al., forthcoming). As the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

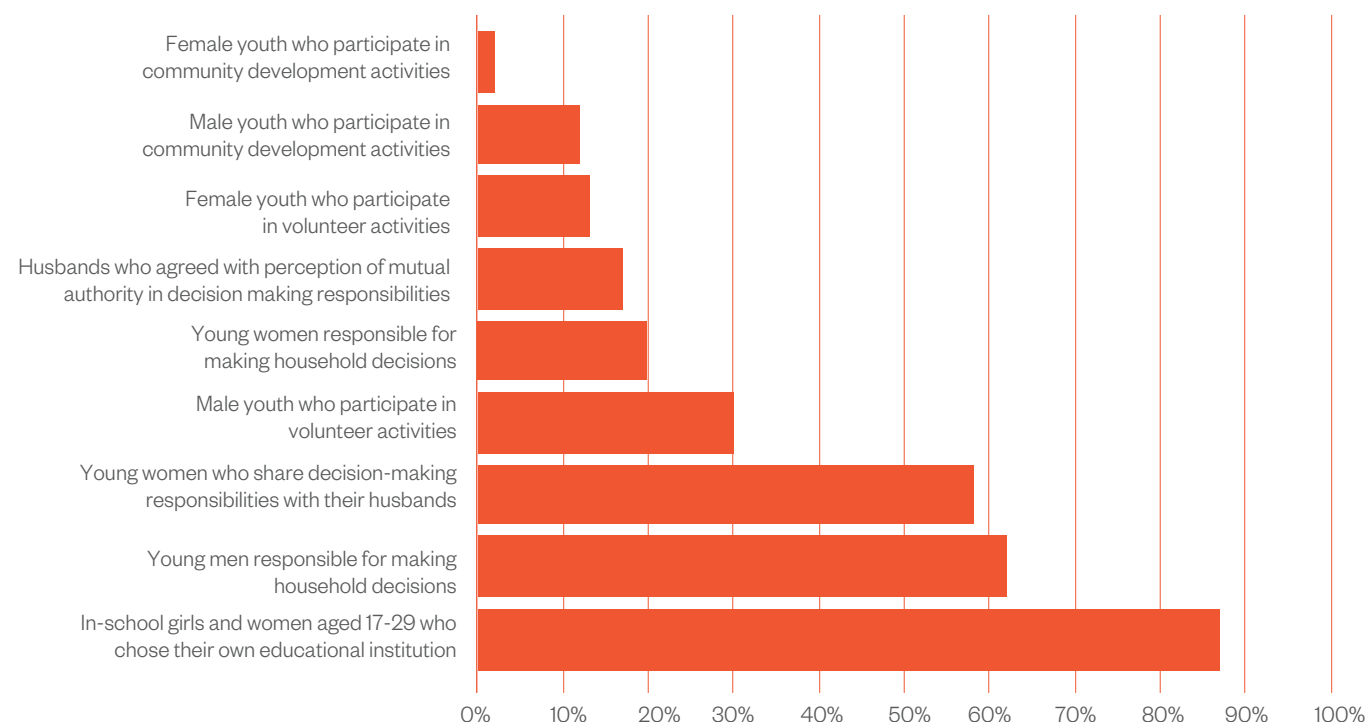
## Box 1: Palestine's legal framework reflects stark gender inequalities

Palestine's legal framework is highly unequal from a gender perspective, with the person status\* law – which regulates matters related to inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody – favouring men. Under the law, a man can, for example, divorce his wife for any reason while a woman cannot divorce without the burden of evidence, and is compelled to give up any financial rights and return her dowry. Moreover, the divorce is only possible if the husband agrees. Women have a legal right to inherit, but will in general inherit a share that is half that of a man's. For example, a daughter has the right to a share that is half of her brother's share. A testimony of a woman in judicial proceedings is also therefore 'worth only half of that of a man'. In the case of divorce, guardianship of children and decision-making power is granted to the father. If a divorcee remarries, she immediately loses custody rights over her children.

*\* Personal status laws are based on Islamic law. In Gaza, Egyptian law applies and in the West Bank, Jordanian law applies.*

*Sources: Ministry of Health data, 2017*

**Figure 1: Different types of decision-making opportunities open to adolescent girls and young women**



Source: PCBS, 2016

(2016: 46) note: 'traditional Arab culture maintains a strong hierarchy with a sacred obedience for the figurehead, older age people, especially males'. In addition, social norms around gender enable adolescent boys to act very differently from adolescent girls, who are restricted by perceptions about appropriate behaviour for women and girls (ibid.) (see Box 1)

Within this context, the GAGE rapid evidence review on adolescent wellbeing and capabilities in Palestine (Pettit et al., forthcoming) highlights that opportunities and spaces for adolescent voice and agency are limited. Reflecting this, a 2015 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS,

2016) survey found that 60% of girls in Gaza report that most of the decisions they make about their own lives are made jointly with others. Only 20% reported that they make such decisions by themselves, while 62% of boys reported making decisions on their own (ibid.). Moreover, the same survey suggested that a girl's ability to make decisions declines when she gets married: 58.1% of female respondents reported that they share decision-making responsibilities with their husband, but only 17.2% of husbands surveyed agreed with this perception of mutual authority (ibid.) (see Figure 1).

## 2 Methods, research sample and research ethics

This paper explores the following key research questions:

- What is the patterning of adolescent voice and agency in the Gaza Strip?
- Which gender- and age-friendly services are available to adolescents and their families in the Gaza Strip to increase adolescent voice and agency?
- How relevant, accessible, user-friendly, and effective are the available services in the Gaza Strip that aim to promote and broker adolescent voice and agency, according to beneficiaries of those services?

To explore these questions, GAGE employed a mixed-methods approach, using online and offline service mapping exercises with service providers and adolescents, a tablet-based QuickTapSurvey™ module completed by 107 adolescents, and a range of qualitative research tools with adolescents, their peers and families. These included focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs), visual participatory methods including object-based interviews, community mapping exercises, vignette, time use and social network mapping exercises (see the participatory research guide for GAGE) (see Table 1).

In total, the research team engaged with 239 adolescents and 69 service providers in two research sites – Shajaia neighbourhood and Jabalia refugee camp – in the summer and autumn of 2017 (see Table 2 for demographic breakdown of the sample).

This briefing paper also draws on findings from our 2016 Participatory Action Research project in Khanyounis, Gaza, involving 35 adolescents. They met weekly with GAGE researchers to undertake a wide range of activities, including peer-to-peer interviewing and participatory photography and videography.

### 2.1 Research sites

Shajaja was chosen because of its central location in Gaza city and the availability of specialised services offered by humanitarian partners and the government, which are often not available in other areas of the Gaza Strip. It has the highest concentration of 'in need' people and refugees (UNOCHA, 2016). Shajaia neighbourhood is a non-camp settlement area with a population of around 120,000 residents. It was heavily affected during the 2014 Gaza–Israel war.

The second site, Jabalia camp is the closest camp to the Erez border crossing with Israel. It is home to nearly 110,000 registered refugees and there is a large presence by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governmental institutions. It is, according to OCHA, home to the second largest population in severe humanitarian need, with even higher vulnerability levels than Gaza city (2016).

### 2.2 Research ethics

The research team adhered to stringent ethical measures to ensure the protection of adolescents and their families as set out under the GAGE Institutional Ethics approval document and GAGE child protection guidelines. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were ensured and data were securely stored. Informed consent was obtained prior to commencing each data collection activity.

**Table 1: Overview of research methods used**

Method	Total participants
Focus group discussions	10 groups with 97 participants in total
In-depth interviews	35 in-depth interviews with adolescents
Adolescent surveys with QuickTapSurvey™	107 survey respondents
Key informant interviews	68 key informant interviews



**Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the adolescent sample (N=132)**

Type	%	Type	%
Refugees	61%	Out of school	36%
Aged 10-14	39%	Male headed household	72%
Aged 15-19	44%	Disability in the family	17%
> 19 years	17%	Social assistance beneficiary	64%
Female	57%	Adolescent services recipient	53%
Male	43%	Single	87%
Median age	15 years	Married	10%
Family size 7-9	49%	Divorced	2%
Family size >9	34%	Separated	2%
Family income 501-1000 ILS p/m	42%	No children	31%
Family income <500 ILS p/m	28%	One child	54%
Family income 1001> ILS p/m	30%	Two children	15%
In school	64%		

## 3 Research findings

Following the GAGE (2017) conceptual framework, we present our findings according to the following outcome-level indicators of voice and agency:

- 1) Mobility (as a precondition for agency) to access public physical spaces, confidently and safely
- 2) Ability to safely access and use age-appropriate information
- 3) Meaningful participation in activities and in decision-making in family, community and school life
- 4) Meaningful civic participation (the ability to address issues of public concern).

### 3.1 Outcome 1: Mobility to access public spaces, confidently and safely

Adolescent girls and boys experience very different degrees of agency on account of their gender. While most girls in Gaza are not able to move around freely and access public physical spaces, boys are allowed much more freedom.

#### 3.1.1 Off-limit spaces: streets, cafés, health care providers and sport clubs

Adolescents highlighted that various public spaces are considered 'off-limits' for girls. Cafés, sport clubs<sup>1</sup> and public transport (see case study 1) are not accessible to girls without a chaperone due to concerns around the 'mixing of genders'.

*'There are cafés for males, but we are not allowed to enter. There are no cafés for girls.'* (FGD, older girls, Jabalia camp)

*'We usually go to the restaurants with our brothers.'* (FGD, older girls, Jabalia camp)

Adolescent girls also mentioned not being able to consult a health care provider for certain issues without their parents' permission:

*'Even if the girls have severe infections [genital infections] they won't let her go to the doctors and would just treat her with home remedies.'* (FGD, adolescent girls, Shajaia)

*'Only married women go to gynaecologist, to protect the hymen, she can't be examined by the doctor.'* (FGD, adolescent girls, Jabalia camp)

They also mentioned that mental health services were not accessible for adolescent girls:

*'If I need psychosocial assistance, no one would understand my need because of the stigma society has against people who talk to counsellors or see therapists.'* (FGD, older girls, Jabalia camp)

*'I feel like if we talk to them ... our people think that we have a psychological complex or a mental problem.'* (FGD, older girls, Shajaia)

*'It is stigmatised to take your daughter or sister to [a] psychiatrist. Especially older adolescents 16 or 17 years old. They call you a crazy girl for going there. Our family cares about people not our health. They sacrifice their daughter's mental condition only because they worry about people's gossiping.'* (FGD, older girls, Jabalia camp)

Economic reasons were also cited as a barrier to accessing health care:

*'They take lots of money from us when we need more services.'* (FGD, older boys, Shajaia)

Girls' lack of access to public spaces was highlighted by the adolescent girls involved in the GAGE participatory research pilot, whose photos underscored community-based activities they are excluded from (see photos 1 and 2):

*'My older sister and my mother participate in an "outdoor Feast Prayer" while I am denied from participations. My mom forced me to stay at home to take care of my sisters.'* (Adolescent girl, 17, Khanyounis)

*'Everything is prohibited ... now that I became a woman.'* (FGD, girls aged 15-19, Jabalia camp)

<sup>1</sup> The following statistics also highlight this trend: most girls (86.9%) engaged in physical activity at home; only 4.9% exercised through a club and 3.8% exercised at school.

Image 1: Girls are not allowed to go out unless their family allows them to .



*'Many girls feel jailed inside their own houses. This is violence and that must be addressed.'* (Adolescent girl, 17, Khanyounis)

*'You are now 17 years old and you should not be outside the house.'* (Adolescent girl, 17, Khanyounis)

These restrictions on adolescent girls' mobility also inhibit them from moving confidently and safely in such public spaces. Girls reported that parents and brothers 'feared for their safety' (FGD, older boys, Shajaia) and therefore 'stop us from going to such associations' (another boy, same FGD). Older adolescent girls in particular faced restrictions around accessing physical spaces due to 'harassment' on the streets by men and boys, fuelling parental concerns around their 'honour'. As one girl emphasised: 'I need permission from both my parents, both must agree, if they do not accept, I will not go out' (adolescent girl, 17 years, interviewing her younger sister, Khanyounis). Brothers were actively deployed by fathers and mothers to watch or supervise and control adolescent girls: *'when we get into a fight and my mom can't solve it she asks my older brother to hit us. They think they have the authority to control us'* (ID, 13-year-old girl, Jabalia camp).

Married girls reported facing even tighter restrictions on their mobility by their husbands and often had very limited or no access to their peers:

*'Sometimes I would ask my husband for a permission to go out, a week in advance and he accepts. However, when [the] time comes, he simply just says no. When I ask him why, he does not have any good reasoning. He has to feel like every decision he makes is his alone.'* (FGD, older girls, Shajaia)

Early-married girls reported having to also ask permission from other members of the extended family. Mothers-in-law often seemed to actively restrict access to public spaces by their daughters-in-law, including health clinics, schools and recreational activities:

*'You take her [mother-in-law's] permission. It is inappropriate not to ... You take permission from her and your husband. If one of them says no and the other yes, I don't do it.'* (ID, 19-year-old girl, Shajaia)

*'My in-laws are the reason for all our problems. When I was ill, they even refused to take me to clinic.'* (FGD, older girls, Jabalia camp)

Some girls explained that they rebelled against such restrictions: they mentioned involving supportive family members (e.g. mothers, big sisters) to counter decisions (*'she can convince him'*, FGD, older girls, Jabalia). Others reported that they had lobbied to get married as they mistakenly believed that would give them more freedom; while others still ignored the advice of parents (*'My mom*



Image 2: This girl is not allowed to visit her family during Eid



*refused to let me attend my friend's party. I didn't listen to her,' 17-year-old girl, Khanyounis).*

Adolescent boys did not face such strict restrictions to their mobility but reported not having complete freedom either. In general, partly due to limited resources, boys reported meeting peers in informal community settings like the supermarket or at home. Girls also reported that 'boys spent much more time outdoors, playing football and visiting friends' (adolescent, 19 years, interviewing peer, Khanyounis). Restrictions on boys were more around agreements on what time to come home, places they wanted to visit and the company they kept: *'During Ramadan, my friends offered to take me with them to a resort by the beach. My dad refused because there was no one from the family with us'* (IDI, 14-year-old boy, Jabalia camp).

Boys reported often rebelling against parental restrictions: *'Sometimes my father does not give me his permission, but I still go out anyway'* (IDI, 18-year-old boy, Jabalia camp). When overstepping rules laid out by parents or testing boundaries, adolescent boys indicated that punishments could follow: *'My father hit me'* (IDI, 16-year-old boy, Jabalia camp).

### 3.1.2 Safe spaces: mosques, school, home, and empowerment programmes run by NGOs or community-based organisations (CBOs)

Adolescent girls named various '*spheres of influence*' that they can move in and out of more freely: schools, mosques, NGO programmes at youth centres, and in their homes. The freedom afforded by such spaces is in large part because they involve girls in a group: *'groups provide security for girls'* (adolescent girl, 19 years, interview with her sister, Khanyounis).

Our service mapping exercise revealed that services to improve adolescents' agency are available (see Figure 1), although more often targeted to boys than girls: *'Associations that aim at amplifying your voices, engage in decision-making, or cultivate our creativity are available for older boys more than girls'* (FGD, older boys, Shajaia) and also tended to involve younger rather than older adolescents (see also case study 1 and Figure 2). Adolescents who had used these services spoke highly of their benefits: *'These programmes help adolescents to overcome some of the challenges they face through*

**Image 3: This boy's father does not allow him to go outside at night: 'There should be more work to bridge the gaps and solving conflict across generations'**

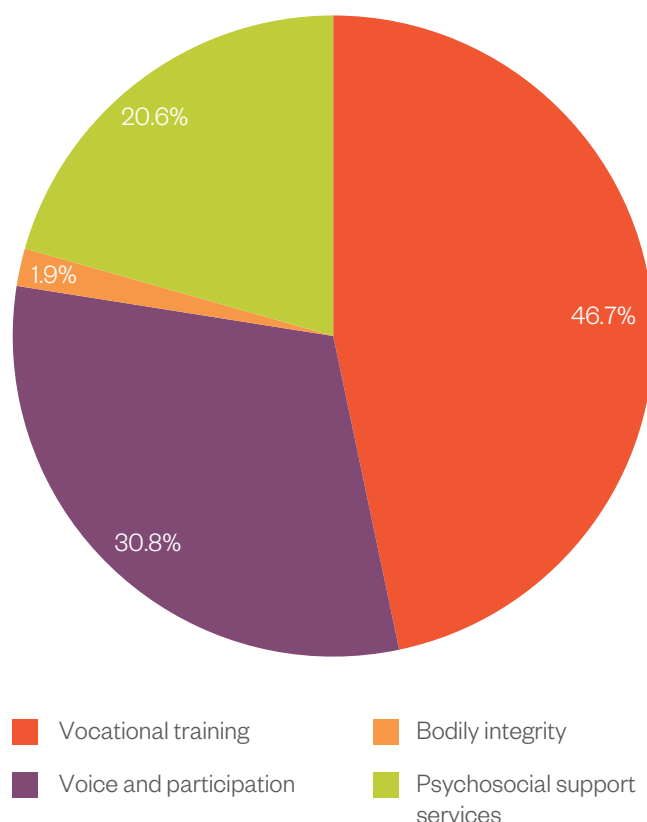


*practising sports, developing talents and improving school achievement'* (reflection ceremony minutes).

However, a number of research respondents, and especially girls, reported not being able to access '*trusted spaces*' run by CBOs and NGOs, partly because of limited programme intake and also the distance from their homes, which increases parental concerns about their safety. Even if most services are free, some girls mentioned not being able to pay transport costs to attend the centres (see case study 2) or missing out on enrolment due to not having connections ('*wasta*') with programme implementers. Others mentioned that the programmes were often short in duration and that quality of training was low, which prompted their parents to halt their attendance. Others simply had '*never participated in such recreation activities for children because I don't know about those places*' (FGD, older girls, Shajaia).

Adolescents with disabilities face additional and compounding barriers to their mobility, citing the lack of adapted transportation and stigma as key challenges: '*The driver did not want to drive me*', (IDI, 19-year-old girl, Jabalia camp). They also reported that discrimination stopped them from accessing services:

**Figure 2: Adolescent programmes and services by type of capability targeted in % (N=107)**



Source: PCBS, 2016b



### Case Study 1: Examples of programmes supporting voice and agency of girls in the Gaza Strip

UNFPA in Gaza has provided small grants for adolescents to help build their confidence, foster positive coping strategies and resilience, and prevent substance abuse. The programme also aims to increase awareness and skills in civic engagement through innovative approaches such as making murals, the blog bus, and 'A day in the life' – online demonstrations filmed with smartphones. UNFPA has also established youth councils, empowering young people to lead community mobilisation efforts.

UNRWA has been delivering human rights, conflict resolution and tolerance (HRCRT) education in its schools since 2000. It has set up school parliaments in every school in Palestine, giving students the chance to learn the meaning of citizenship. School parliament membership is open to students in grades 7 to 9 (but some schools have representatives from each class), and members have to campaign to win their peers' support. The parliament can make decisions about student affairs, school activities and the local community, and school laws and regulations. It can give students the agency they lack in so many other spheres of their lives.

NGOs and associations also provide services for adolescents to increase their participation and agency. The Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and Rights Activation (PYALARA), for example, engages adolescents in media-related programmes that aim to articulate and communicate adolescent and youth concerns with policy-makers using media. It has produced a youth newspaper and TV programme (broadcast on Palestine TV).

*'Because I was treated badly due to my disability [I left school], they thought that since I'm disabled I won't be able to succeed or earn a degree. The teacher told me to sit in the back and she asked me to avoid communication with my classmates. There was no classmate in the whole side I used to sit. They abused me and used to talk badly about me, everybody would move away from me, even the teachers who are models for students would do the same.'* (IDI, 19-year-old girl, Jabalia camp).

Moreover, health centres and other public spaces were often not adapted to the specific needs of adolescents with disabilities. As a result, girls reported being easy victims of harassment:

*'These problems happen a lot of times to disabled girls, when male adolescents abuse or hurt them. I advise them to sit alone on public transport so they could avoid the issues caused by the boys on the streets.'* (IDI, 19-year-old girl, Jabalia camp)

## 3.2 Outcome 2: Ability to safely access and use age-appropriate information

Access to age-appropriate information relevant to adolescent lives also emerged as a challenge, especially for girls who, due to their restricted mobility, reported being less able to access and navigate information via various channels: peers, (female) family members, schools, mosques, markets, and new technologies, which some parents considered potentially 'haram' (proscribed): as one girl noted: 'My parents rarely agree [for me to use this media without supervision]' (adolescent girl, 17 years old, Khanyounis, interviewing her sister). Adolescent boys, in general, had easier access to different channels, which in turn impacts on the type of information they are able access.

### Case Study 2: The cost of private transport

There is a pressing need to improve policies around public transport to enable adolescents to access physical public spaces. Gaza's transport system relies largely on privately owned buses and shared taxis (PCBS, 2014). This makes transport expensive and inaccessible to poor families who are unlikely to have a car.

Practical access to public spaces is further restricted for girls, who are not able to walk alone on the streets or to 'go with taxi drivers' due to conservative gender norms. As one 19-year-old boy in Khanyounis said: 'The difference between me and my sister is that my young sister cannot go alone with the taxi driver'. Many girls, and particularly from poorer families, reported that not having access to transport severely limited their mobility.

Girls reported that some NGOs and CBOs recognised their problems getting to and from public spaces and took measures to address this: 'the institution has its own private bus to transport students' (FGD, younger girls, Jabalia). Government service providers, and service providers from NGOs and CBOs operating in Gaza seem aware of the limitations girls face: many provide services to adolescents enrolled in their programmes and schedule activities to end at the 'time that girls need to be at home' (adolescent girl, pilot study, Khanyounis).

### 3.2.1 Access to peers at schools

Service providers in school enable and promote adolescent access to some types of information (such as academic information) but restrict access to other types of information – for example, on love, relationships, sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and rights, career counselling and mental health support. Teachers reportedly skip classes around menstruation and health, and prefer to focus on the academic curriculum. Girls reported not being prepared for the changes they will undergo during adolescence: *‘They [the teachers] tell you that your family should tell you about that’* (FGD, older girls, Jabalia) (see also the GAGE companion Health briefing, Abu Hamad et al., forthcoming). Access to information around mental health is also not readily available in schools with adolescents fearing school counsellors would *‘speak*

*to their parents’* (FGD, adolescent girl, 18, Shajaia) about their private concerns. Adolescents were even reported to have been removed from school because of speaking to some service providers (see also the GAGE companion Psychosocial briefing, Abu Hamad et al., forthcoming).

Girls and boys have access to peers and friends at school. This was particularly important for adolescent girls, who indicated that their parents would often not ‘allow [them] to go with friends’ (FGD, older girls, Shajaia). If they were allowed to go, their friends would first be screened by male members of the family: *‘Our families ask about the details of our friends and their families’* (FGD, older girls, Jabalia). Girls who were no longer in school – for example, married girls – reported having less access to information than their peers still in school, unable to access teachers or friends.<sup>2</sup> One 17-year-old girl (Khanyounis) involved in the participatory

**Image 4: Two girls during a school break in Gaza**



<sup>2</sup> When assessing girls’ access to information, it is important to take into account the different ‘spheres of influence’ they move in and out of. Early-married girls, for example, often have distorted access to information as their mobility has been restricted from an earlier point in time. They have more access to information from in the (in-law) family than outside, although the information they get is likely to be heavily controlled by the husband and/or his family.

action research pilot in Gaza indicated that *'school is a source of support and fun for me. Here I share bad and good times with my friends'* – without being monitored.

### 3.2.2 Access to family support at home

Given girls' greater mobility restrictions compared to boys, girls reported spending a considerable amount of time indoors or in the houses of their family members. Adolescent girls reported spending a lot of time with aunts, mothers, sisters and younger siblings, whereas adolescent boys reported spending time at home with their brothers, fathers and uncles. The implications of such segregated spaces are far-reaching: as girls spend much more time in the company of women indoors and in women-only spaces, *'men have knowledge about things that women don't know anything about'* (FGD, younger girls, Jabalia camp).

However, adolescents involved in the GAGE participatory pilot study also indicated that intergenerational conflicts are common, with limited positive communication between older and younger generations. Adolescent girls reported asking older female relatives for support either around their academic career or on health-related issues, including menstruation, but recounted not being able to discuss all issues with their family members. For example, families do not tend to have conversations around romantic feelings and SRH information: *'Our family does not speak about that'* (adolescent girl interviewing her sister, in Khanyounis). Another girl added that when she married:

*'I had no idea what marriage was. I thought that marriage is all about supporting my husband. I had no idea that it included a sexual relationship. Nobody told me anything, even my family. At the night of my wedding, I ran away from home. I went back to my family. I was terrified.'* (IDI, 15-year-old girl, Shajaia)

*'He (my husband) was the one who told about everything and he asked me if my parents did not tell me anything? I told him no one told me anything. After he told me about what was to happen, I was too scared and unable to accept things, and so we went for a whole month without consummating the marriage.'* (FGD, older girls, Shajaia)

### 3.2.3 Access to health care advice

Adolescents reported that some NGOs (for example, the Near East Council of Churches (NECC)) provide them

with health care advice, education and information: *'They gave us brochures and flyers, and I read it all by myself'*. Pregnant adolescents mentioned that doctors in NECC clinics provided them with information about healthy nutrition during pregnancy:

*'I need to eat eggs and eat food with good nutrients for the foetus. The doctor told me. Here in the NECC clinic they told us to take care of our diet as pregnant especially with anaemia. We are told to eat well and what kind of food we should eat to increase haemoglobin.'* (FGD, older girls, Shajaia)

Yet, health care workers in government hospitals do not necessarily provide information on nutrition or SRH (*'he just writes me the medicine and that is it'*, said one older girl in an FGD in Shajaia); another reported that they *'self-learn'* about these topics. On pregnancy and childbirth, another participant explained why she was not told anything before the birth: *'No, they don't like to talk about the subject so we don't scare us'* (FGD, older girls, Shajaia), nor are girls told about healthy nutrition during pregnancy:

*'They never did that. I'm pregnant and I'm in the eighth month of my pregnancy, yet no doctor ever asked about nutrition. If I talked about it to them, they might prescribe vitamins [and other] meds, but if I didn't, they never would. Also, if they talk, they don't give us enough information about why and the importance of eating certain food. That doesn't seem important to them.'* (FGD, older girls, Jabalia)

### 3.2.4 Access to new technologies

With their mobility restricted, adolescents reported spending a considerable amount of time watching television (TV) or using social media (see Box 2): *'Girls use the internet a lot and watch series'* (adolescent girl, Khanyounis, 17, interview with peer). Watching TV was a common way to pass the time, with older girls reporting that they watch Egyptian and Turkish soap operas while younger girls watch cartoons. With electricity scarce due to regular power outages, TV is not always accessible. Even so, girls in the research pilot in Khanyounis reported watching (on average) for over four hours every day. As such, girls saw a critical role for service providers in reaching them at home through new media: *'Since girls watch TV shows and series it would be great to produce one on early marriage and the consequences. Girls should understand that life is not as depicted in the Turkish series'* (female, 17 years, letters to president). Boys, who have more



## Box 2: Use of new technologies among Palestinian adolescents

- Almost 70% of Gazan families possess a computer, laptop, or tablet, and another 36.9% have an internet connection.
- While 78% of boys aged 15-17 own their own phones, only 38% of girls do.
- Of teens aged 15-17, 88% of girls versus 33% of boys go online only at home.
- While 22% of male youth access the internet at a café, only 1% of female youth report using cafés to get online.
- 8% of young women admitted, in a recent survey, either engaging in or receiving flirtatious exchanges through social media. This percentage increased to 16.7% among Palestinian youth aged 18-22.

PCBS 2015, 2016

recreational activities available, spend less time watching TV, and did not perceive it to be a key channel for providing information to adolescents.

Girls also reported frequent use of social media and were excited about the new opportunities it opened up for them: *'I can watch cultural and historical web pages'*

(adolescent girl, 19 years, Khanyounis, interview with peer); *'I contact my friends and just explore'* (ibid.); *'I dream of my smartphone'* (adolescent girl, 19 years, Khanyounis, interview with her sister); *'we fight over the cell phone'* (IDI, 14-year-old girl, Shajaia); *'we entertain ourselves usually through the internet'* (FGD, older girls, Jabalia). With limited access to trusted adults and unbiased information, girls reported using the internet to search for information they cannot obtain otherwise. For example, due to sociocultural beliefs around appropriate information for girls, adolescent girls also take risks in order to access information on SRH:

*'I was shy to ask anyone but I had internet at home and so I used to go to the net and see the informative websites [about SHR]. I know it would have been better if I go to ask my parents and they are educated people but I was shy.'* (FGD, older girls, Shajaia)

The internet was not only a source of information and entertainment but also of communication and a way to access support networks: *'I contact them [my family] through internet applications like Viber'* (adolescent girl, 16, Khanyounis, interview with peer). As one girl explained: *'It is good against isolation ... The world comes to us'* (adolescent interview, 19 years, Khanyounis, with her sister).

**Image 5: This 17-year-old girl spends much time indoors due to mobility restrictions. She spends most of her time watching TV series. She explained that many girls watch television to 'kill time'**



### 3.2.5 Religious institutions

Boys and girls alike reported easy access to religious information. Adolescents also mentioned being praised by family members, service providers and the wider community for absorbing this type of information: *'I was happy when I was honoured for memorising the whole Quran ... We get gifts when we succeed'* (FGD, older girls, Jabalia camp). Male members of the family were also supportive in providing religious information to adolescent girls: *'He goes to the mosque and helps me memorise Quran. He also sits with us and helps us read. He invested good amount of time to help me'* (IDI, 16-year-old girl, Shajaia); *'my father helps me in memorising the Holy Quran'* (IDI, 13-year-old girl, Jabalia).

Yet, services provided in mosques were not always 'safe spaces' according to some adolescent research participants. Some even perceived them as dangerous places to visit as information was considered to be biased:

*'The problem is that mosques are politicised ... Sheikhs there try to include us under their wings, like they'd convince us to be supporters of their movements ... They once said they'd give me a gun too.'* (FGD, older boys, Shajaia)

*'Some mosques are for jihad.'* (FGD, older boys, Jabalia camp)

Indeed, some boys said they stopped going to the mosque because they *'feared we may be brainwashed'*. Yet others indicated that because of such strong political

polarisations, religious people are losing their influence as people start to lose trust in them.

### 3.2.6 Programme activities organised by NGOs and CBOs

A number of NGOs and CBOs offer various 'empowerment' activities, from summer and winter camps, training on leadership, and engagement in advocacy and lobbying initiatives to media and sport-related activities. Adolescents involved in these types of activities and who took part in the GAGE QuickTapSurvey™ indicated that a key advantage of participation in adolescent centres was being connected with adults with whom they can discuss their problems or dreams (61.4%, n=35) and that it helped them access information about other services that adolescents might use (42.1%, n=24).

## 3.3 Outcome 3: Meaningful participation in activities and in decision-making in family, community and school life

Adolescents, and especially girls, noted that access to information does not necessarily mean being able to act on such information. Accordingly, in this sub-section we discuss adolescents' ability to make decisions around issues that matter to them in school, in the family and in the community.

### Case Study 3: Lessons about adolescent engagement from Islamic leaders

Some girls spoke highly of religious service providers – often younger and of the same sex – who would befriend them and offer support. An early-married girl, for example, indicated that a female service provider in an Islamic centre made her feel part of a wider community:

*'I love spending time with her because she would talk about religion and not to hate anything that god wanted [her talking about her losing a child]. She invited me to pray with them in Ramadan and to attend teaching sessions about religion, I really like spending time with her.'* (IDI, 19-year-old girl, Jabalia camp)

Others indicated that they like the service providers because they discuss issues relevant to their lives:

*'The sheikh always visits us and preaches us about relationship issues – how females should deal with males. The seminar matches our needs such as sexual harassment and how to use social media appropriately. It also offers trips.'* (FGD, older girls, Jabalia)

Some boys also spoke highly of some religious service providers: *'Because of his [the Imam] morals and his attitudes. He prays and gives charity, he goes faraway places to help poor people'* (IDI, 15-year-old boy, Jabalia camp); *'The Imam is a good person'* (IDI, 12-year-old boy, Jabalia camp); *'He sends us on trips, summer camps and there are fitness and entertainment activities like ping pong'* (IDI, 13-year-old boy, Jabalia).

It was also the facilities and services that adolescents received that made their participation regular: *'It is spacious and clean'* (FGD, younger boys, Jabalia camp), and particularly in comparison with schools. There were also other perks, which were appreciated by adolescents: *'There are things like food and sweets that they give to encourage us to go to the mosque'* (FGD, younger boys, Shajaia).

### 3.3.1 Decision-making power at school

Adolescents reported having limited decision-making power at school. Only a few students reported that their schools had set up school parliaments (UNRWA schools only, not government schools) and that only a select group of excellent students could take part in the activities. Adolescents that were not doing so well in school would not be chosen to voice their opinion and, as a result, felt excluded from the decision-making process ('Students who take part in it would act so cocky' (FGD, older girls, Shajaia)). Yet even the small number of students taking part in such fora did not feel able to critique or change education services: 'If you speak your mind, you would be judged and be treated like you made a grave mistake' (FGD, older girls, Shajaia). Headteachers, in contrast, reported consulting parliamentarians and considering their perspectives.

### 3.3.2 Decision-making power at home

Adolescents reported that in Gaza, the male head of the household (usually the father) makes most decisions: 'We are not in Europe, we are in Gaza, and we have our customs and traditions. The father is the main decision-maker in our community' (adolescent girl, 17 years, interview with father). For married girls, it is their husband: 'My husband has never given me my freedom to say my opinions' (IDI, 16-year-old girl, Jabalia camp). This often proved challenging, as there was not always consensus between the adolescent and the decision-maker: 'There is no mutual agreement between us and our parents. They ... don't agree on the things that we want' (FGD, older girls, Shajaia); 'Our families don't listen to our opinions about any issue' (FGD, younger girls, Jabalia).

Adolescent girls (in the decision-making table exercise, 16-19-year-olds, Khanyounis, see Table 3) indicated that their mothers often play a large role in determining how they spend their time in the household:

*'My mother controls my spare time more than me.'*

*'My mother determines how I spend my free time.'*

*'When I don't finish my homework my mom shouts "stand up and get to [house] work".'*

Adolescents also reported that families interfere in their school-related issues such as school hours and how they should study. Girls report that they have limited power over this aspect of their lives: 'I must participate in home chores, I have no other choice' (adolescent girl, 16 years, interview with her sister, Khanyounis).

Girls also reported not always having a say in decisions around marriage ('Girls cannot say "I love this person"; they will kill her', adolescent girls, 16-19 years old, Khanyounis). Nor do they have much say in their future education ('I dream to join a university, but my brother told me "you won't join it"'), or even when they get pregnant. Married adolescent girls also underscored that they were not able to make decisions around contraceptive use, with serious implications for their lives:

*'My husband doesn't want family planning because my mother-in-law influences him. They are also waiting for my husband's brother to have kids; till today they haven't had one.'* (IDI, 19-year-old girl, Shajaia)

*'I can't decide when I can be pregnant. After my child, I went to the UNRWA clinic to family planning and received the contraceptive pill from the clinic to prevent pregnancy. My mother-in-law was angry when I told her that I had abstained from pregnancy and had taken contraceptive pills. She threatened that she would get her son to marry another woman, so she would give birth to more children for him. My husband was affected by his mother's words and fought with me and threatened me to take me to my family's house and marry another to give birth children for him. Lastly, I am pregnant and I'm in my seventh month of pregnancy. I am not satisfied because that was not my decision. I would like my next pregnancy to be at least after two years of the first one. My first daughter is one year and two months old only. I am extremely fatigued and exhausted.'* (IDI, 16-year-old girl, Jabalia camp).

On the other hand, some adolescents described their parents and families as an enabling force: 'my father listens to me and thinks about my concerns' (17-year-old girl, Khanyounis). Some girls reported that their fathers were 'tender' and supported them with their education and helped them do homework. In some instances, marriage could also open up decision-making opportunities to girls: 'I was not able to have any decision at my family house but now my husband is sharing with me the process of decision-making within our family' (IDI, adolescent girl, 16, Khanyounis, interview with peer).

It was also noted by adolescents and adults involved in the research that parental behaviour around decision-making had changed over time (see case study 4). Participation is thus not always a static concept and can change over time with adolescents today being better able to make decisions about their lives than their (grand)



#### Case Study 4: Changing norms over time

Adults involved in the GAGE intergenerational interviews observed that parental behaviour had changed over time. One grandfather, interviewed by his adolescent grandson, explained:

*'In my time women participated less in decision-making. Now all are participating in decision-making because their level of education increased. Before, the father would not even listen ... girls did not have any choice. They imposed marriage and divorce, told them who to marry too. Now youth have their own decisions and family has less effect on the decisions like before. Now girls decide everything: they have a decision in marriage, what to study at which university and they become bolder to discuss their parents.'* (Adolescent interview with grandfather, Khanyounis)

A mother interviewed by her daughter also confirmed the changing norms and restrictions over time:

*'The marriage was before in a traditional way. The mother went to look for a girl for her son and went to see her. If he agreed then men and women came and identified the dowry, then they did the wedding. Now most girls and boys work with each other, they meet each other in the universities and they may make relation ... also there are more relations from Facebook ... Now the discussion takes place but in reality youth do not follow their parents' decision because they consider them an old-fashioned.'* (Adolescent interview with her mother, Khanyounis).

parents were able to do when they were young. This was particularly the case for adolescent girls who in this day in age – according to their parents – were more likely to voice concern around marriage, divorce and other important aspects of life. Adolescent girls, as illustrated above, did not necessarily agree with their parents on this point but most could recognize that the restrictions in terms of household decision-making faced by their (grand)mothers were harsher than those that they faced in their lives.

As Table 3 shows, girls were able to make some decisions, about school work, free time (after having done all their homework and housework), what to eat, what to spend pocket money on, and what clothes to wear (within boundaries set by culture and parents around 'appropriate wear'). Wider freedom and ability to counter decisions from parents and family in-law was reported to only follow after adolescents gained a certain level of economic freedom, which is often challenging given high unemployment rates and social norms restricting women's work (see also the companion briefing on economic empowerment, Abu Hamad et al., forthcoming). One boy felt that adolescents

would not be able to make decisions because: *'they still depend on their parents'* (male, 18 years, letters to president). An early-married girl indicated: *'He [her husband] can't take us out [of the restrictive situation they face in his parent's house], we don't have money, his shop is rented'* (IDI, 19-year-old girl, Shajaia). Adolescent girls also reported that – if they continue to abide by cultural and social norms and rules to protect family honour – financial independence could buy them some more freedom in terms of their mobility.

#### 3.3.3 Decision-making power about technology use

Adolescents reported having some agency around the use of technology, with one saying they *'part own the decision'* on what to watch or read on their phone, internet and computer. In practice, however, parents and brothers often supervise girls' use of such media: *'My brother always determines what I watch on the TV'* (FGD, adolescent girls, Shajaia). As one participant said: *'Parents constantly want to know what we are doing on the internet. There is no respect*

**Table 3: A decision-making table constructed by girls involved in the GAGE pilot**

Things that girls can make decisions about...	Things that girls can't make decisions about...
School – courses, focus	Internet use
Free time after homework and housework has been done: 'no one except me owns the decision then' *	Being late at night outside the house
What to eat (rarely)	Marriage (to an extent – even if it is less likely for parents to impose marriage, family should agree with marriage choices)
What to spend pocket money on	Recreational visits
What clothes to wear (provided they respect dress code rules)	Choosing friends

\*Ibid

Image 6: Limited decision-making permeates all aspects of life, including dress: 'I select my clothes taking into consideration those that are allowed by my family and the community'



Image 7: Many adolescents in Gaza are unable to freely use the internet because their parents control their life and decisions





for personal privacy. They check our phones constantly' (FGD, older girls, Shajaia). This was also the reason why some girls brought their mobile phones to school (even if mobile phones were prohibited by school) – together with friends, they were then able to use their mobiles to browse the internet freely (if they had connectivity). Girls reported that headteachers could confiscate their phones, look at the content and then take any actions necessary (such as informing their parents), which again shows that girls' agency around phone use is limited.

Adolescent boys also reported that their phone use was monitored. One participant explained that his father only allows him to use the smartphone or internet occasionally and under supervision. He uses the mobile to browse the internet only when his father allows him (see photo 7).

### 3.3.4 Decision-making power in religious institutions

Decision-making for adolescents within religious institutions also differed by gender. Adolescent boys noted that religious leaders do not always allow them to partake in decision-making but that there is the potential for inclusion and decision-making within the mosque. For example: *'when you come more often they will ask you', 'maybe as a visitor they won't ask'* (FGD, adolescent boys, Shajaia).

Interestingly, although they themselves had very limited voice within the mosque, adolescent girls saw an important role for service providers in religious institutions in enabling girls to get more decision-making power in their households and communities: *'Imams at the mosques have most influence on men and husbands and if they raise awareness about women issues then it would help a lot, improving the situation of wives and female adolescents at home'* (FGD, older girls, Shajaia).

### 3.3.5 Decision-making power in health centres

Adolescents indicated that young people are often not able to make a decision about the treatment they are receiving from doctors and health care providers because *'if we go for medicine for example ... They ... treat ... us as young women [like we don't know anything]'* (FGD, older girls, Shajaia). Additionally, they noted that lack of money limits their decision-making power around possible treatment options: *'We cannot afford medicine that is not available in the clinic because of the price'* (FGD, younger boys, Shajaia).

**Table 4: Adolescent perceptions about the quality of existing services related to voice and agency**

Variable	#	%
Service providers encourage adolescents to speak up and propose their own ideas (always)	33	57.9
Service providers encourage adolescents to speak up and propose their own ideas (sometimes)	7	12.3
Overall, adolescents learn interesting things (always and usually)	48	84.2

### 3.3.6 Decision-making power in empowerment programmes

Some programmes included modules on women's rights and civic rights that aim to strengthen the decision-making power of adolescent girls. Girls enrolled in these services seemed to have a positive view on their impact in terms of their ability to negotiate change: *'I used to be shy, but they put me in theatre and I feel like I became braver'* (FGD, older girls, Shajaia); *'I am now able to speak and answer back confidently and without any fears'* (FGD, older girls, Shajaia). Others mentioned being able to make some decisions – for example, around ways of expressing themselves (*'I chose what to draw'*, FGD, older girls, Shajaia) and what activities to take part in. Almost all participants (n=107) spoke positively about the decision-making opportunities these kinds of programmes afforded them (see Table 4).

Yet, adolescents reported that only a few in turn sought to negotiate change with parents and other *'power-holders'*. Adolescents argued that involving power-holders (such as parents, brothers and religious leaders) would increase the effectiveness of such services.

## 3.4 Outcome 4: Meaningful civic participation (the ability to address issues of public concern)

Not surprisingly, given the limits on mobility, access to information and decision-making that adolescents (especially adolescent girls) face, opportunities for their meaningful civic participation were found to be scarce. Of female youth surveyed by the PCBS (2016), only 2.4% reported involvement in civil or cultural organisations and

only 0.6% were affiliated with a political party or coalition. When it comes to voting, 46% of young women and 67% of young men were planning to vote in the next election. The PCBS survey also found that only 13.3% of female youth participated in volunteer activities, compared with 30% of male respondents (ibid.).<sup>3</sup> Girls and boys both expressed that trust in politicians, ministers and public leaders is low, and that this also affects their willingness to take on a more civically engaged role in society.

Similarly, brothers and male peers in our research noted that adolescent girls are actively restricted from exercising an independent civic identity, as many believe that girls and women 'should be in the house' and not in the 'streets' (FGD, adolescent girls, Shajaia). Even if girls did not necessarily agree with this, some did not think it was possible to become politically active. For example, in

a vignette exercise called 'Madam President', when asked to imagine being president for a day (see the PAR research toolkit, Jones et al., 2017, and Box 3 below), girls mentioned that having a female president is '*not possible in Gaza*' ... '*Doctors, lawyers, teachers, and any other job, but not the president! She cannot take that responsibility; it is a fact!*' (FGD, younger girls, Jabalia).

Some girls disagreed and did see women being engaged in civil society and public life: '*I agree that women have the right to be a president just as equal as men*' (FGD, younger girls, Jabalia). Some thought that adolescent girls and boys could be involved in tackling community issues, especially overcoming electricity deficits, helping poor people in the community, and calling attention to youth unemployment and failing infrastructure.

### Box 3: Dear Mrs President

During the pilot research study in Palestine, adolescent girls and boys were asked to write letters to a fictional female president. The following letter by a 17-year-old girl from Khanyounis illustrates how adolescent girls recommend policy-makers to solve issues around gender inequality:

*'Dear Mrs President, It's an honour to be able to contact you. I hope you are doing well.*

*... One of the major obstacles is gender discrimination. The problem, due to certain traditions and customs imposed on girls, deprives them of most of their rights, which most boys can easily attain. As a result, chances of male versus females is different when it comes to dreams, achievements in life, and the right to take decisions. So, girls repeatedly hear "you're not allowed to" from their families, not because it is not logical, but because the one who asked for these rights is a girl. Families fear for their girls when it comes to working with boys in a mixed workplace. And this fear bears consequences ... When it comes to girls' right to access education, they are usually forced to stop going to school in early ages for the sake of serving the family. Most of the time, marriage means the end of a girl's education. Contrary to girls, boys are allowed to do whatever they want, even things that are considered taboo in our society!*

*Here are some of the negative effects facing girls almost every single day:*

- 1. Girls feel they are ... undervalued in society, and they cannot stand equally to men.*
- 2. Girls are suffering from psychological deterioration.*
- 3. Society is suffering loss of female role.*
- 4. Due to social isolation and segregation, girls can hardly get experience in work.*

*There are many ways to solve such a problem, though it could take long. Here are a few:*

- 1. Raising awareness has its effective role among families. We could do such through meetings at homes, mosques and public places. In addition, holding meetings at schools.*
- 2. Encouraging girls' and women's role in society by providing job opportunities.*
- 3. Using media channels to send a clear message that refuses the discrimination with all its types.*
- 4. Providing statistics and for cases of affected females and providing guidance to girls who are likely to fall victim for such devaluation.*
- 5. Starting projects where girls and boys work together, and involving families.*
- 6. Focusing on the necessity of education for both genders.*
- 7. Institutions and centers should cooperate with each other on this issue.*
- 8. Social and public figures, including women, should speak publicly on such problems.*

*Thank you!*

<sup>3</sup> This might have something to do with adolescent girl's limited trust in the ability of decision makers to change engrained realities. Jones and Hamad (2016) for example illustrated that while the quotas introduced in the mid-2000" s have helped ensure women's representation in formal politics, they are yet to translate into decision-making.

Boys are also not always able to acquire skills to develop and exercise an independent civic identity as they indicated that they are limited by various contextual factors but particularly unemployment. Girls also noted that it is difficult to start a family due to the lack of formal

job opportunities; (see also the companion GAGE brief on economic empowerment, Abu Hamad et al., forthcoming). Unemployment brings other risks, including the risk of radicalisation for boys, particularly those from poorer families and from strongly conservative backgrounds.



# Conclusions and implications for policy and programming

Overall, our findings underscore the complex and interlinked challenges to adolescents' full capability development in the Palestinian context, and the critical role that context-specific gendered norms and practices play in shaping adolescent capabilities.

In terms of voice and agency, adolescents indicate that they are subjected to various structural discriminatory practices and beliefs that limit their ability to act. For adolescent boys, this is around their age and restrictions to safe information and services; for adolescent girls,

discriminatory gender norms and mobility restrictions limit their agency and ability to act and have a say in decisions.

In terms of implications for policy, programming and future evidence needs, Figure 3 maps out our findings in relation to national policy commitments and global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)-related commitments. Where relevant, we highlight where additional investments are urgently needed to support monitoring of progress towards achieving these commitments.

**Table 5: Summary of key findings as they link to SDG 5 – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls**

Goal 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere	Much more progress needs to be made in formulating, implementing and enforcing policies to promote gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.
Goal 5.2 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation	Due to limited decision-making power within the household, adolescent girls are still subject to child marriage, early marriage and forced marriage. Reporting systems do exist and some girls use these, but more efforts are needed to raise community and parental awareness about the psychosocial, educational and economic costs of child marriage.
Goal 5.3 Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels	Reforming the personal status law must be a key priority in tackling gender inequality as it shapes so much of what women can do. Efforts are also needed to tackle mobility restrictions on adolescent girls and women, including improving transportation systems, educating parents, and raising community awareness about the costs of such restrictions in terms of girls' and women's future opportunities.
Goal 5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate	Adolescent girls have limited access to information and services due to discriminatory social norms which limit their mobility (more on this in the forthcoming GAGE briefing on economic empowerment). In addition, it is critical to raise awareness about human rights and child rights, through school and non-school platforms (including religious organisations), to enhance adolescent girls' rights to voice and agency.
Goal 5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life	Adolescent girls have limited and unequal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. Promoting adolescent girls' participation in empowerment programmes, alongside work with parents and communities to re-value girls' role in society, are critical first steps. Adolescent boys also need access to opportunities for participation that focus on alternative paths to voice and agency to Islamic jihad activities.
Goal 5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights	Because girls have very limited access to decision-making about their health, it is important that there are more opportunities within schools for girls to have access to information about their SRH rights, and that parents and community leaders are also involved in outreach efforts. Married girls in particular need to be supported by health care providers – perhaps with the mediation of NGOs/ CBOs – to make decisions about their bodies in terms of childbearing, spacing of pregnancies and safe sexual relationships.
Goal 5.7 Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women	Adolescents have increased access to information and communication technologies but girls in particular are not able to safely or freely navigate these types of networks as their behaviour is often closely supervised by their parents, caregivers and other family members. There is an urgent need to give parents guidance about safe internet access for their children, and for adolescents to receive support so that they know about reputable sites and online platforms that provide age- and gender-sensitive information.

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#### **GAGE Programme Office**

Overseas Development Institute  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
United Kingdom  
Email: [gage@odi.org.uk](mailto:gage@odi.org.uk)  
Web: [www.gage.odi.org](http://www.gage.odi.org)

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Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South.

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