RESEARCH ARTICLE

Empowering young immigrant girls in Canada through the 'Girls' Voices' Curriculum: A qualitative study [version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

Background: Gender inequality is a global issue. In Canada, 70% of women experience some form of inequality in their lifetime. Immigrant adolescents in Canada make up a substantial proportion of newcomers, and immigrant girls face the threat of subjugation and oppression, which has a significant impact on their health, development, and economic outcomes as well as gender inequality. Research on girls' empowerment and resilience-building programs and interventions is virtually nonexistent. In this project, we implemented the 'Girls' Voices' Curriculum. The aim of this project was to engage and empower South Asian (SA) immigrant adolescent girls and to promote gender equality in Canada.

Methods: This study utilized a qualitative descriptive design. Pre- and post-curriculum implementation focus group discussions were conducted.

Results: A total of 16 adolescent girls ranging from 11 to 18 years of age participated in this study. The participants described challenges many young girls face in relation to gender inequality such as gender discrimination, gendered stereotyping, barriers to education, etc. The 'Girls' Voices' Curriculum allowed participants to highlight and reflect on the various problems faced by SA immigrant adolescents in their communities. The participants learned to examine these challenges through a variety of engaging activities to identify their root cause, effects and propose solutions to bring long-lasting change. The curriculum equipped them with useful tools such as decision-makers maps and advocacy skills to educate decision-makers by creating and delivering powerful messages influenced by personal stories and evidence-based literature.

Conclusion: The study provided significant insight into understanding

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the diverse challenges encountered by SA immigrant adolescent girls in Canada and linking them to the effectiveness of the 'Girls' Voices' Curriculum. The girl-focused development programs that emphasize developing self-confidence, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and decision making are effective in empowering the socially deprived adolescent girls locally and in the global context.

Keywords

Adolescents, Girls, Empowerment, Immigration, Girl's Voices curriculum

This article is included in the **Human Migration Research gateway**.

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Introduction

Adolescent girls make up 16% of the world's population - equivalent to one in six people.¹ Adolescence (aged 10-19 years)² is a foundational phase when the physical, emotional, cognitive, and social capabilities essential for adult life are established; they form lifelong health behaviors, and future health trajectories take shape. Canada is among the most ethnically diverse regions in the world. Immigrant adolescents make up a substantial proportion of newcomers to Canada; approximately 34% are under 25 years.³ In Canada, a large part of adolescent girls' development is impacted by migration, but they are a too often overlooked part of the migration phenomenon. Immigrant girls face potential subjugation and oppression, which has a significant impact on their physical and psychological health and development, economic outcomes, and gender inequality. Accounts of the experiences of immigrant adolescent girls show that, despite having more educational and career opportunities than ever, many girls and young women still face sexual violence, harassment, low self-esteem, negative body image, discrimination/exclusion, and so on.⁴ A nationwide survey reported that immigrant girls, specifically Asian girls, in Canada feel pressure from society to conform to unrealistic expectations of femininity, not only in terms of their appearance but also in terms of their behaviors or which interests they should pursue.⁵ In many South Asian (SA) cultures, patriarchal values and social norms maintain gender inequities and stereotyping. These disparities deprive young girls of their privileges, autonomy, and decision making⁸⁻¹⁰ and therefore negatively impact their prospects in life. Despite the large number of immigrant adolescent girls in Canada, research into empowerment and resilience-building programs and interventions are nearly nonexistent.

To support and enhance gender equality among immigrant girls and young women in Canada there is a need to design and implement strategies that tackle the root causes of gender inequality and reshape unequal power relations. At the Women Deliver Conference 2019, RISE UP and GIRL UP launched the 'Girls' Voices' Curriculum.¹¹ RISE UP is a global movement that activates girls and women to transform their lives, families, and communities by investing in local solutions, strengthening leadership, and building movements. Since 2009, RISE UP has already built a powerful network of over 500 youth leaders and has implemented over 100 laws and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) policies that have impacted 115 million girls and women in Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and the United States. The United Nations Foundation founded GIRL UP in 2010 - a global leadership-development initiative that positions girls to become leaders in the movement for gender equality and works with a global community of partners to achieve gender equality worldwide. RISE UP collaborated with GIRL UP to develop a 10-week curriculum to activate disadvantaged and underprivileged girls in communities worldwide. This curriculum is an important tool for girl-led advocacy that amplifies girls' voices and enables them to lead change in their communities to build a stronger movement for gender equality. Girl leaders and their allies will use this curriculum to launch girl-centered training programs, establish Girl Up clubs, and bring girls together to create change. This curriculum will not only enable girls to raise their voices for change, but also support adult allies in key partner organizations to create safe spaces for girls to implement their advocacy strategies, help them understand relevant laws and policies related to SRHR, and support them through the advocacy implementation process to improve their SRH and overall well-being. The curriculum can be used as a guide to identify the issues that most deeply affect girls in any community and to develop local strategies to empower girls to raise their voices, identify and develop solutions to effectively approach decision-makers in their communities, and make tangible change. The curriculum is culturally sensitive and is designed for implementation in low-resource settings. Moreover, the curriculum has also been designed to accommodate girls with limited literacy i.e. reading at a fifth-grade reading level, and provides the evaluation tools so the curriculum can be completed in low literacy settings. The main goal of this curriculum is to engage girls, provide a necessary safe space to talk about the issues they face, and work together to develop girl-centered and girl-led advocacy strategies to improve their lives and advance gender equality around the world.¹¹ The specific objectives of this research were:

1. To investigate the impact of Girl's Voices Curriculum on immigrant adolescent girls' lives.
2. To explore and identify barriers and challenges in curriculum implementation.
3. To explore the cultural sensitivity of the curriculum.

Methods

Study design

We utilized the 'Girls' Voices' Curriculum as a tool to empower immigrant SA adolescent girls to raise their voices against the issues related to gender inequality and become gender equality advocates, activists, and change agents. Pre-and-post-focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to identify the impact of the 'Girl's Voices' Curriculum and areas for improvement to implement the curriculum at a national level.

Curriculum implementation

The curriculum was divided into four sessions, each four hours long, and delivered over five weeks. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we conducted these sessions in an open outdoor space from April 24 – May 22, 2021, using all public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus. The curriculum utilized an experiential learning approach by connecting girls to increase knowledge of the new concepts presented in each session. The curriculum was facilitated by female researchers/facilitators (SM & MR). The researchers had no prior relationship with study participants. The participants were informed about the study purpose with a study information letter along with a consent form. No one except the researchers and participants were present during the curriculum implementation and data collection. The facilitators provided a judgment-free zone and a safe space for participants to freely share their personal stories and work effectively within groups by creating group agreements at the beginning of the course. Furthermore, they utilized several interactive, reflective and artistic pedagogical strategies in delivering the curriculum. The activities included role-play, games, writing personal stories and elevator pitches, group discussions, drawing timeline infographics, problem trees, and mapping exercises.¹¹ The full curriculum is available here: <https://riseuptogether.org/girls-voices-curriculum-2019/>.

Data collection

Working with Edmonton's Indo Canadian Women Association as our major community partner, we recruited 16 SA immigrant adolescent girls. Purposeful and convenience sampling approaches were used. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we recruited 16 participants to ensure health and safety measures were adhered to. Recruitment posters were posted on the Indo Canadian Women Association website and social media platforms. Participants who were interested contacted the research assistant. The first author (SM) followed up with interested participants by telephone. The first and second authors conducted FGDs before and after the curriculum implementation that ranged in length from 40-50 minutes. FGDs were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants for FGDs were divided into two groups (11–14 years) and (15–18 years) to ensure that our data captured the voices of girls and women of various ages. At the beginning of pre-FGD, we asked the girls to create visual timelines to help them to better understand their important life events and experiences and how these impacted their health and development.¹³ Timelines are a graphic, arts-based data-collection strategy that is particularly useful with vulnerable groups such as young girls.¹² In participating, the girls creatively reflected on their experiences, which enhanced their trust, ensured meaningful, accountable engagement,¹² and fostered discussion in FGDs. A semi-structured interview guide was used to identify the unique challenges that SA immigrant girls face before and after the migration (*Extended data: FGD Guide*).¹³

We made the preliminary results of the study available to participants for their validation.

Data analysis

The data obtained from the demographic survey form were analyzed in Excel to calculate the focus group sample's descriptive statistics. The first and third authors (SM, AR) coded the data. All quotes were encoded using the qualitative software program NVIVO® version 12 (QDA Miner Lite is a free alternative qualitative analysis software). An inductive thematic approach was used to examine the data (quotes). Recurrent and common concepts were then systematically identified across the data set and grouped through a coding system (content analysis).¹⁴ Similar codes were grouped into general concepts classifying them into subcategories and main categories. We maintained an audit trail of our research process to enhance the dependability and validity of our findings. Reporting of this study followed the Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) checklist.¹³

Ethical statement

This study utilized qualitative description.^{15,16} Pre- and post-curriculum implementation FGDs were conducted. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Alberta Health Research Ethics Review Board (Pro00097432). Researchers obtained written informed consent for data collection and publication from all participants in this study. A study information letter was provided to all study participants and their parents (Appendix A & B).¹³ Parental consent was obtained for participants under 16 years of age. All the participants above 16 years signed the consent form.

Results

Demographic data

A demographic survey form was used to collect participants' demographic information (Table 1). A total of 16 adolescent girls ranged from 11 to 18 years of age, with an average age of 15 years, participated in this study. The majority (eight) of participants were born in Pakistan; five were from India, two in Afghanistan, and one in Bangladesh. Besides this, 56% of participants have been in Canada for more than five years; in comparison, 44% of participants have spent 3-5 years, and 18% spent 1-2 years in Canada. Most (n = 10) participants were studying in junior high school, specifically, five in both grade 8 and 9; two participants were in grade 7, three participants were in grade 11, one was in a post-secondary institution. The demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants (N = 16).

Variable	N	%
Participant's age		
11-12 years	1	6.25
13-14 years	6	37.50
15-16 years	7	43.75
17-18 years	2	12.50
Participants birth country		
Pakistan	8	50.00
India	5	31.25
Afghanistan	2	12.50
Bangladesh	1	6.25
Number of years in Canada		
1-2 years	3	18.75
3-4 years	4	25.00
5 years	3	18.75
>5 years	6	37.50
Highest level of education		
Grade 7	2	12.50
Grade 8	5	31.25
Grade 9	5	31.25
Grade 11	3	18.75
Post-secondary student	1	6.25
Mother's education level		
I don't know	3	18.75
Less than High school	1	6.25
High School diploma	3	18.75
University	9	56.25
Father's education level		
I don't know	2	12.50
Less than High school	1	6.25
High School diploma	3	18.75
University	10	62.50

Pre-curriculum implementation FGDs findings

During the FGDs and in participants' individualized timeline infographics, various challenges were highlighted that are commonly faced by SA immigrant adolescent girls within diverse social determinants of health. The analysis revealed four themes: gender inequality, barriers to education, the impact of migration on psychosocial well-being, and the value of social support networks.

Theme 1: Gender inequality

This theme represents the participants' experiences of gender inequality within their communities and the larger social context. Mostly, the participants described gender inequality as the unequal treatment of girls and boys or discrimination based on gender, which was evident in one participant's statement: "We should treat all the genders equally and not put people down for what gender they are".

Gendered stereotyping: The participant's responses portrayed a common theme of women's perceived inferiority, subordinate, and weak personality and highlighted gendered stereotypes. The participants reflected on how everyone is conditioned by gender stereotypes, one participant stating:

"I think it's always assumed that like we're [girls and women] weak and that we can't do like things that men would do".

Another participant, while sharing stereotyping encountered in school, said:

"Like that we can't actually do it and that we're weak and that we're in this class for like no reason. But like in all honesty, we could probably just do it just as well as them".

Furthermore, participants were also able to link these gender stereotypes to predefined gender roles and showed understanding of societal segregation of roles based on gender:

“Sometimes how girls are expected to do certain things like stay home and cook. But like in reality they want to ... they want to work. They want to go out. But like people are like, ‘No, you [girl] should stay home and cook and stuff’”.

Other participants shared their school experience, stating:

“Like in school a lot of boys would be like, ‘You’re [girls] supposed to be working in like the kitchen’”.

“... sometimes in school, if like the teacher needs any helpers for ... lifting chairs or tables ... if a girl raises her hand she won’t pick them; she’ll go for the guys because they’re stronger and they can lift the tables better”.

These responses identify gender stereotypes and stereotyping against females as a significant cause of SA immigrant female adolescents’ challenges compared to males.

Discrimination: The adolescent girls shared many observations and personal incidents of discrimination and segregation, humiliation, and a lack of freedom of expression that is deeply rooted in patriarchal values and social norms pervasive in the South-Asian countries. Participants drew attention towards gendered occupational segregation based on the social stereotypes against females and its strong influence on their career choices and other adolescents. One participant described this occupational segregation as:

“... like men are given more like, I guess, heavy lifting jobs and like women are doing like more academic like work, basically”.

The frustration due to this segregation was expressed as:

“So like sometimes we’re presented opportunities, but like since there’s so many stigmas around something, it just puts us down and like we don’t take advantage of the opportunities. Like in careers, some careers are just assumed that they’re made for men, but like when like a female gets an opportunity to like do that career, there’s like the stigma around it just puts us down and we don’t feel like doing it anymore”.

During the discussions, participants also highlighted the most common experiences of gender discrimination faced by females during their education and employment. A participant pointed out a gender bias in the distribution of education and shared that:

“I was put in an all-girls school in Panama, and I couldn’t do a lot of the things I wanted to. So that was kind of discouraging”.

Similarly, the participants also discussed the issue of the wage gap, which was vocalized by one participant:

“And things like employment, both like men and women should be paid equally, especially if like the woman is doing the higher like skilled job”.

Further insight into the intensity of discrimination was developed as participants highlighted the burning issues of humiliation and the lack of freedom of expression. Many participants raised these issues during the discussion and represented them by a falling drop in their personalized timeline infographic. The humiliation and their right to freedom of expression were compromised within the family system and at school. A participant shared an incident when she was humiliated and bullied by her classmates:

“People tell me that I’m not good at soccer when I joined a sports program at our school, and they said that I wasn’t good because I tried out playing in the field and people made fun of me and mocked me for it”.

Another participant expressed disappointment with the lack of freedom of choice:

“They have like the ideals that women should be home by ten. Because if they’re out later, something wrong’s going to happen. And that before they leave they should finish their chores. But when it’s guys, they can come and go as they please, and that’s not equality”.

Many participants commented on not being allowed to wear their choice of clothing, and if they did, they faced criticism from their families and communities:

“Um, like when you wear tank tops in school, the teachers are like, ‘It’s distracting’, and stuff like that. But like you should teach guys to not be distracted with that”.

In summary, the majority of the participants highlighted that as a SA immigrant girl they face gender inequality and stereotyping at their home and in the community.

Theme 2: Barriers to education

This theme represents the barriers to professional and health education faced by immigrant adolescent females from a SA background. Many participants identified that their access to academic and professional education and their future career choices were mainly influenced and controlled by the gender stereotypes and values of the patriarchal society of their families and immediate community. Participants admitted that societal values responsible for defining gender roles that relegate women primarily to domestic worker and childcare, have hindered access to basic academic education. A participant reflected during the discussion on how she had to fulfill more household responsibilities in order to educate herself compared to her male siblings:

“I think we are empowered to get our education, but with that there’s like things – there’s challenges that we face that men don’t. Like for example, if I have homework and my brother has homework, I’ll have to do – like I’ll have to wash the dishes and he can – like my parents will say, ‘Yeah, you can just go do your homework’. But I’ll be like in charge of doing the dishes, even though we both have homework. So like I’ll have more like challenges to face to get my education than he does”.

During the discussion, it was also highlighted that, as a result of gendered occupational segregation, participants were discouraged to choose and acquire education in male-dominated professions despite their passions:

“Um, like I feel like engineering, maybe, because it’s like people just assume it’s like a male job because it’s like a lot of like handwork, right? So, like, like assume that females can’t do engineering, but like in reality we can do anything we want, basically”.

Not only this, one of the participants illustrated how occupational segregation was also evident in the extracurricular clubs offered by schools regardless of expressing their interests:

“One thing I think more girls should have access to is like coding and robotics clubs or camps, because I’ve been trying to get into a few, but they only allow boys to be in them. So it’s – it’s kind of hard for me to find a good club to join”.

Theme 3: Impact of migration on psychosocial well-being

Migrating to a new country raises issues regarding adolescents’ acculturation, including adaptation to social values, language, social integration, and identity development in a new socio-cultural environment. Some participants in this study recognized the adaptational stress in response to migrating to a new country and adjusting to the physical and social environment. Participants displayed the anxiety of migration, starting a new school, and learning a new language (French) by drawing a drop on their personalized timeline at that point. This also shows that immigrant adolescents’ psychosocial well-being is largely affected by their living conditions, educational environment, and the capability to develop new support networks.

Theme 4: Value of social support networks

Adolescence is a period of significant transitional changes, including hormonal development, new independence in decision making, and expanding their social network beyond family with mainly friends and school peers. In this study, many participants positively exhibited a new friend circle in their personal timeline. On the other hand, participants who were struggling to socialize and make friends portrayed feelings of emptiness by a steep drop in their timeline infographic (*Extended data: Sample Timelines*).¹³ Typically, females possess a caring role and are more dependent on their family and friends, making them vulnerable to relational stress.¹⁷ The group’s vulnerability for relational stress was evident as many participants pointed negatively to losing their immediate family members and good friends due to migration to a new country.

Post-curriculum implementation FGDs findings

Theme 1: Enhanced knowledge and awareness about girls' rights

The curriculum facilitated participants to highlight and reflect on the several problems faced by immigrant SA adolescents in their communities. Through the problem tree activity, participants learned to examine these challenges and identify its root cause, effects and propose solutions to bring long-lasting change. The participants stated a problem tree method, a new and beneficial strategy to identify the relevant resolutions by directly inspecting the root causes. The program also provided girls with an opportunity to enhance their awareness of culturally sensitive issues such as sexual harassment, which are rarely debated and discussed within families and communities due to associated taboos. A participant verbalized the significance of this discussion:

“And it [discussion] also like made them aware of what it [sexual harassment] is, just so they can try to avoid the situation, or if it does happen to them, they know that it's okay to go to someone and talk about it”.

Furthermore, the participants welcomed group discussions about various challenges faced by SA immigrant adolescents, particularly regarding sensitive issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights. Learning about the different forms of issues, causes, and actions plays a critical role in preventing and efficiently dealing with these challenges. Participants had the opportunity to develop awareness about girls' empowerment and learn about strategies for exercising it within their family units and communities. The curriculum introduces and facilitates the awareness and development of effective communication and presentation skills, useful for program participants in the advocacy of their rights. Initiating dialogue with decision-makers was considered to be extremely challenging by participants in the pre-program survey. Similarly, most participants expressed their desire to learn effective ways to communicate, emphasizing voice training and body language to improve confidence while having a conversation and educating the decision-makers. The stages involved in the advocacy planning process, which includes delegating the various task functions and roles, identifying and arranging meetings with the primary decision-makers, planning and strategizing the activities for educating the decision-makers, effectively communicating their advocacy message, and ensuring it's understood, were entirely new skills to learn and practice.

Participants recognized the significance of formulating and delivering effective and robust advocacy messages while putting forward their opinions and demands for serious consideration. A participant expressed this during the post-FGD as:

“I learned that when you're like discussing a situation with a grown, like the mayor or government, it [message] should be like short and simple, so they can understand it”.

The participants' attempted many questions correctly in the post-assessment which was not attempted and left unanswered in the pre-assessment [10, page 104-107]. This highlights that the Girl's Voices curriculum positively developed participants' knowledge about the elements of a compelling advocacy message.

The curriculum positively shaped participants' perspectives about women's empowerment from the early years of their lives. The participants demonstrated that young adolescents also face similar challenges and are more vulnerable to gender violence due to a lack of awareness of their rights, confidence, and the skills to raise their voice against gender inequality. The Girl's Voices curriculum empowerment strategy provided an opportunity and a platform for all ages of adolescents to learn from one another's experiences, build resilience, new friendships, and expand their social network.

Theme 2: Change in attitude and practice

The curriculum helped the program participants develop agency and gain practice as a catalyst change agent against gender inequality and its detrimental effects on adolescents within their communities. Participants were equipped with useful tools like decision-makers maps and advocacy skills to educate decision-makers by creating and delivering powerful messages influenced by personal stories and evidence-based literature. A participant stated:

“Actually [Girls' Voice Curriculum] help promote the change. And I feel like that was really helpful for like everyone because at one point or another we're probably going to need those skills”.

The curriculum made them reflect on the significance of role modeling for other adolescent and younger girls in their communities and provoke a desire to raise awareness about girls' empowerment, be role models, and guide them to supporting organizations and safe spaces dedicated to adolescent girls when needed. A participant expressed the passion of girls empowering other girls:

“I would tell them about like women empowerment, and that there are like things that you can do to get help if you’re in a certain situation. If you ever feel like you need to talk to another girl like there’s like a safe space”.

The program participants acquired problem-solving skills through the problem tree strategy and learned to set realistic personal life goals by analyzing the meaning of different life events and how they have impacted the participants’ lives. One participant explained the use of these skills in their daily living challenges and said:

“I feel like the [problem] tree that we made has like helped me realize that like there’s an actual physical way to solve a problem. If I had a problem in my life, or even just in school, I could make something similar to the [problem] tree and try solving the problem. And I would know exactly what to do”.

The significant impact of the Girls’ Voice Curriculum in empowering girls was summarized by one participant as:

“I think the most I took away from it [program] was ... how to advocate for ourselves, and if there’s like something [negative] going on, and like we want to change, how we would step up [initiate]”.

Theme 3: Curriculum evaluation and cultural sensitivity

The researchers comprehensively evaluated the program’s effectiveness through a post-program FGDs and a program evaluation form¹³ to better understand its role in developing and enhancing girl’s empowerment and the changes needed for its further implementation at a national level. First FGD was conducted in person and then participants completed the program evaluation form. Participants appreciated that the curriculum is easy to understand and useful for all ages of adolescents. All participants enjoyed the problem tree activity and felt confident and accomplished enough to develop and suggest solutions by analyzing the root cause and effects of a problem. Participants were very confident in sharing personal stories and experiences of dealing with the various challenges adolescents face, the engaging activities decreased their fear of society and boosted their confidence in promoted empowerment and has given them the opportunity to learn how to elevate their voices for their rights and to support their actions and decision-making. The participants enjoyed the presentation and elevator speech activities involved in the program and these reduced their anxiety around public speaking and encouraged them to advocate for themselves and other adolescents confidently. The majority of participants (n = 13) confirmed in the FGDs that the topics included in the Girls Voice Curriculum and the pedagogy used to deliver the program were culturally sensitive. The group dynamics were set on respect, freedom of speech, and confidentiality. Participants valued the group discussions on sensitive issues such as sexual harassment because it is essential to be aware of these issues as they are not discussed within families or communities, and adolescents encounter them daily. Overall, participants appreciated the facilitation of life skills including communication, presentation, reflection, advocacy, and debriefing as valuable for becoming empowered adolescents.

Discussion

The study provided significant insight into understanding the diverse challenges encountered by immigrant SA adolescent girls in Canada and how effective the ‘Girls’ Voices’ Curriculum is in creating change. The study highlighted the main issues around gender inequality resulting from stereotypes that create various pronounced forms of discrimination. Children are socialized from birth to believe that girls and boys have different gender roles in society, which manifests gender inequality in communities. Social norms are defined as the shared expectations or informal set of rules that explain how one should behave within the society.^{18,19} The social norms based on cultural and religious values often define gender roles in many SA communities.^{20,21} For example, adolescent girls from Pakistan highlighted that in Islam both men and women are encouraged to seek knowledge. However, the cultural and religious practices intended to maintain women’s domestic role in Islam is often emphasized in Muslim societies and can lead to gender discrimination around seeking higher education. Pakistani girls who participated in the project stated that even though they are not restricted in pursuing higher education, their access to academic and professional education and their future career choices were influenced and controlled by the religious and cultural values of patriarchal society, their families, and immediate community.

Adolescence is a crucial stage of human development due to the rapid physical, cognitive and psychosocial growth that takes place. The development at this stage impacts thinking, decision-making, and interaction with the world.²² During this phase, many adolescent girls are denied access to the resources and skills needed to protect themselves and ensure their bright futures.²³ Gender stereotypes and discrimination limit adolescent girls’ capacity to develop their abilities, pursue careers, and make decisions about their lives.¹⁸ The result can be a violation of human rights and fundamental freedom.⁷ The major findings of this study were how the traditional attitudes and gender stereotypes perpetuate widespread practice involving gender-based violence, discrimination, sexual harassment, and humiliation.²⁴ In this study, the SA immigrant adolescent girls in Canada gave various types of evidence for the ways they face gender

inequality in their families, schools, and communities such as additional domestic responsibilities at home, limited freedoms, limited choice in sports, no power in decision making in family matters, etc.

SA immigrants in Western countries often continue to retain their traditional values, beliefs, and expectations.^{20,21,23,25-27} In traditional SA families, adolescent girls are raised in far more protected, controlled and sheltered home settings compared to the majority of adolescents in Canadian society. They face rigid gender norms concerning socialization. Gender segregation is a prominent instrument in socialization that effectively manages the distribution of power and social reward, and also defines gender-specific social roles. For example, men in SA families generally have greater independence, autonomy, and educational opportunities, whereas women are often restrained by domestic responsibilities.^{21,25} While girls are expected to perform household chores and take care of younger siblings, while boys have more freedom (e.g. going out after school). In addition, SA girls must follow strict family rules regarding respect for elders and male members of the family, and elders' decisions. These norms discourage girls from voicing their opinions,^{21,25} which can result in stress-induced psychological disorders and behavioral issues.²⁸ Many girls in the pre-FGDs reported that they lack the skills and knowledge to voice their feelings and fight for their rights.²³

With regards to girls' participation in sports, the study findings reveal that girls' participation in sports was greatly influenced by gender stereotypes, especially in masculine-typed sports. Despite the benefits of sports participation on girls' development and well-being, participation drops dramatically as young girls enter into adolescence.²⁹ Football, soccer, baseball, hockey, wrestling, and basketball were considered masculine-typed sports. However, a recent study's findings revealed that social support from parents, siblings, and peers positively impacts girls' participation in masculine-typed sports.³⁰

The study findings also pointed towards gender inequality in western countries, which is evident in occupational segregation and differences in gender and immigrant wage gaps. According to Statistics Canada, in 2018, employed women aged between 25 to 54 earned \$4.13 (13.3%) less per hour than their male counterparts. Gender-related biases are anticipated as one of the accountable factors for the differences in the men's and women's wage gap.³¹ Furthermore, the American Institute for Conservation/Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation's (AIC/FAIC) compensation surveys (2009; 2014) revealed a large pay gap between males and females.³² According to the conference board of Canada (2015), the immigrant wage gap for females (23%) is higher than for men (19.2%). SA immigrants are also vulnerable to employment discrimination that varies between provinces.³³ Most of the students in our study have shared experiences of teachers enforcing gender-stereotypical behavior which was consistent with recent research conducted to explore teachers' perceptions on gender roles and classroom practices in a comparative manner.⁶ Immediate families' and teachers' attitudes and behavior have significant effects on students, it is through these influences they learn and internalize attitudes and behavior regarding gender roles.^{8,6,25}

Moving forward with the diverse challenges faced by SA immigrant adolescent girls in Canada. The Girls' Voices Curriculum has focused on developing life skills to raise empowerment and agency. The girl-focused development programs that emphasize self-confidence, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and decision-making are fruitful in empowering vulnerable adolescent girls.²³ According to Kabeer, capabilities, and agency are linked; the greater a girl's capabilities, the more agency she will have to make life goals and choices, and the more agency she has, the further she will develop her capabilities.³⁴

Study strengths and limitations

This study had various strengths. We gained in-depth insights into young SA immigrant girls' experiences of gender inequality through a range of tools and techniques. The variety of ages and cultural backgrounds of the respondents resulted in rich information that is critical to address gender inequality and empowerment among SA immigrant girls in Canada. We also note various limitations. The selection criteria for the study participants was purposive; for example, our selection of only SA immigrant girls might have led to information bias and prevented some participants from expressing perspectives that the rest of the group might not accept. The focus-group environment might have introduced social-desirability bias and prevented some participants from expressing perspectives that the rest of the group might not accept.

Future directions and recommendations

The findings of this study corroborate existing literature about immigrant girls' empowerment in the Canadian context and contribute new insights into the experiences of SA immigrant girls with regard to gender inequality. The study findings amplify the fact that gender-related norms, values and stereotypes still pose potent barriers to young immigrant girls in Canada. The research findings are valuable for SA immigrants, educators, social workers, counselors, and policymakers in developing empowerment-focused interventions and programs and introducing relevant policies (e.g., anti-discrimination policy). The findings also demonstrate the benefits of counseling services and safe spaces within

school campuses which will be useful for school administrators. These developments will support the empowerment and agency of young women and enable them to raise their voices for immigrant adolescent girls. This study has demonstrated young girls are capable of challenging discriminatory norms, dislodging stereotypes, and creating permanent change not only in their local community but also on a larger scale.

Young women have the potential to transform their communities. Empowering girls and promoting gender equality is crucial to achieving sustainable development goals.¹¹ The goal of our research was to develop local strategies to empower girls to raise their voices, identify and develop solutions, and to approach decision-makers in their communities effectively to make tangible changes. This high-quality, collaborative, practice-oriented research built SA immigrant young girls' abilities to respond more effectively to their needs through a girl-led advocacy program that amplifies girls' voices. The development programs like 'Girl's Voices' Curriculum that emphasize developing self-confidence, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and decision making are fruitful in empowering socially deprived adolescent girls locally and in the global context.

The prospective goal of this line of investigation is eventually to implement the 'Girls' Voices' Curriculum at the national level to empower young adolescent girls in our society.

Data availability

As the data underlying this research is identifiable, it cannot be submitted to an online repository. Data will only be available on request by emailing the corresponding author meherali@ualberta.ca.

Extended data

Mendeley Data: "Girls Empowerment Project FGD Guide". <https://doi.org/10.17632/tp585h7nsj.1>.

This project contains the following extended data:

- FGD guide
- Participant timelines images
- Evaluation Form
- Appendix A & B (Consent and parental consent forms)

Reporting guidelines

Mendeley Data: COREQ checklist for 'Empowering young immigrant girls through the 'Girls'Voices' Curriculum in Canada: A qualitative study'. <https://doi.org/10.17632/tp585h7nsj.1>.

Data are available under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Authors' contributions

SM conceived and co-designed this study, SM and MR implemented the curriculum, conducted FGDs, led the analysis, and drafted the manuscript. All authors commented on all drafts of the paper. All approved the final draft.

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Introduction

The introduction is clearly organized and written and offers a helpful definition of the problem. As a reader, I would have been interested to learn more about the research and goals/values/guiding principles that undergird the curriculum. I found it surprising that there was no theoretical framework mentioned - what are some of the theoretical concepts/approaches/stances/lenses the authors used?

Methods

The methods are clearly described, the process is made relatively transparent. I would have liked to know what kind of codes were used during the inductive phase. I would have also liked to learn more about the researchers' positionalities and how they may have shaped the research process (not so much in order to understand potential bias, which we all have, but to understand their motivation for doing this study and contextualize the interview situations).

Findings

I understand that the purpose of the study was to evaluate a curriculum, but I would like to encourage the authors to see the interview as a discursive space rather than take what is being said in that situation at face value and mold it more or less directly into findings. For instance, if participants say "we should treat all genders equally", researchers could try to understand how they understood gender or equality and which other themes these were connected to, and how this can inform current theory. For that, a theoretical framework would be important. The point here is not at all to doubt or dismiss the participants' experiences, but add an analytical layer to the research process.

Discussion

The discussion section synthesizes the findings well, but I would recommend that the authors also add another level of abstraction to it: What is the meaning of this study for the academic community, for other local communities? What does it help us see/understand beyond the Canadian context?

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Multicultural education

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

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