

Exploring youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms in
the era of the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how international and local ideas of youth agency in changing gender norms align and misalign in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) era. It proposes the ‘youth as agents of change’ model based on interviews with youth-centric NGOs and a narrative analysis of development actor policy and programming. This model demonstrates development actors perpetuate youth agency in changing gender norms as: 1) youth as altruistic; 2) interpersonal norms are the locus of gender inequality; 3) individualised, liberal views of youth empowerment; and 4) normative roles for youth engagement with politics.

This thesis examines and complements the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme on youth agency. Bangladesh, a GAGE programmatic country, is the site through which I exemplify the way local youth agency may be manifested in urban, affluent youth – juxtaposed against evidence on ‘youth as agents of change’ as a multi-level analysis. This thesis offers an analytical lens for youth agency in pursuit of youths’ own ideas of gender equality norms, by considering concepts of agency, structuration, and norms, in dialogue with one another. This lens is applied to the empirical data on Bangladeshi youth to suggest their agency involves: 1) voice, 2) critical consciousness development, 3) aspirations, and 4) navigating parental relationships.

This thesis finds the everyday mundanity of local-level youth agency in shifting existing gender norms which contends with the grandiosity of youth-led change suggested by international actors. Yet, the affluent, urban Bangladeshi youth share in the white, liberal feminist rationale of urban/global ‘progressivism’ as superior to local/rural ‘traditionalist’ norms, a dichotomy which this thesis explores and problematises. These findings are significant for evidencing development architecture as underpinned by neoliberal politics and a racialised approach to who will *save the world*, with little relevance to youth’s heterogenous realities.

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Abbreviations

AF	Adult female (respondents of the GAGE survey tool)
DFID	(The UK) Department for International Development
FCDO	(The UK) Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office
FCO	(The UK) Foreign and Commonwealth Office
GAGE	Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence
GEWE	Gender equality and women's empowerment
IGO	Intergovernmental organisation
IPPF	International Planned Parenthood Federation
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RQ	Research questions
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund, formerly the United Nations Fund for Population Activities
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WAGGGS	Worldwide Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts

1 Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Addressing the Research Problem

1.1.1 Justification

We are at the peak of youth visibility, participation, and inclusion in international development, where youth can be engaged as advisors, policy analysts, budget allocators, and campaign leaders. Across the development industry, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), governments, and civil society have been driven by the rhetorical pursuit of 'youth as agents of change'. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as the apex of 'youth as agents of change'. The SDGs are a 15-year United Nations (UN) development agenda to reduce poverty, inequalities, and environmental degradation spanning from 2015-2030 (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Development industry discourse around the SDGs emphasises youth to be 'agents of change' in meeting present and anticipated global development challenges, though youth are largely invisible in the textual framework of the targets and indicators.

It is the invisibility of youth in the textual framework that has spurred young people to be positioned by development actors to be pivotal in the delivery of SDGs. In the development industry, the role of young people as 'agents of change' can involve several processes, including valorising youth-friendly service delivery; the role of youth as data collectors in the SDG monitoring process; and championing youth-aggregated data in the monitoring of the SDGs.

The SDGs instruct development practice and discourse on what norms should be, how social change should occur (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019), and what is valued as '*left behind*'. Existing studies that critically analyse the norms of the SDGs find that the transformational nature of the SDGs falls into question (Briant Carant, 2017; Cummings et al., 2018; Gabay and Ilcan, 2017; Razavi, 2016). The SDGs fail to challenge the dominant economic model that upholds social and economic inequality around the world (Razavi, 2016). The "epistemological, hegemonic, or politico-economic assumptions" (Gabay and Ilcan, 2017, p.337) built within the SDGs result in the framework perpetuating normative notions of valued knowledge, sustainable development, modernity, colonialism, exclusion, citizenship, and constructing political problems as technical problems (Cummings et al., 2018). Deregulatory and liberalised economic and social policies underpin the SDGs and erase the plurality of local realities (ibid), running in contradiction to the framework's discourse of sustainability and equity. These

themes suggest that young people's agency is being essentialised and instrumentalised to pursue global challenges, with likely little relevance to their own heterogenous realities and needs.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate in what ways international and local ideas of youth agency align and misalign. Given 'youth as agents of change' is rhetoric that exists beyond the SDGs to development actors, civil society, and activists, this PhD investigates the SDG *era*: the multiple strands of actors that are in some way translating, receiving, or perpetuating the norms of the SDGs – 1) the SDGs themselves, 2) youth-centric development actors, and 3) young people who are engaged in social change.

1.1.2 Framing the research

Development actors can be directly informed by the SDG agenda; they may be influenced by donors who are motivated by trendy thematic priorities of the SDGs or have informed the SDG agenda-setting process themselves. Few studies offer a critical analysis of the role of young people and how 'youth agency' may be instrumentalised in the SDGs and subsequent development actor response; a gap in which this research will be situated. There is also limited research on the specific 'youth as agents of change' rhetoric across either SDG discourse or in broader development policy and practice. Gender norm change, or the kinds of norms that comprise 'gender equality', offers a lens to examine how youth agency is constructed in the SDG era. Rhetoric over 'gender norms' and 'gender norm change' has become a significant motif at the international level and is an area of contestation and debate. I interrogate the assumptions and ideologies embedded in the SDGs that propose 'youth as agents of change' around gender equality norms. To do so, I consider 'who counts as youth?' in the SDG machinery – across the UN definitions of youth, SDG formulation, ideology, and SDG implementation. As well, I review illustrative examples of gender and youth issues from the textual framework of the SDGs, using feminist development theory.

This thesis will establish that the apparently gender-neutral 'youth as agents of change' rhetoric is coded as female, based on the liberal feminist politics of inclusion and white normativity. This thesis asserts that 'youth as agents of change' is almost synonymous with girlhood. This stems from a recent history in development programming and rhetoric that is attributed to advocacy campaigns - such as Nike Foundations' The Girl Effect - which have suggested that "to invest in a girl is to save the world" (Bent, 2013, p.12), as to reorient public perception around where development intervention can be most impactful and sustainable. The valorisation of girlhood (and invisibility of boyhood in development discourse) remains but is now concealed as the more ambiguous catch-all of 'youth'.

With this are particular constructs, or assumptions, of young people's agency to pursue particular visions of 'GEWE'. Feminist thinking is useful to propose how the development industry that once gave much-misplaced resources and burden onto womanhood now places this onto girls of the 'global south', through the ways they imagine 'youth'. Literature that interrogates the pursuit of 'gender equality and women's empowerment' ('GEWE') in the SDGs provides grounding for this thesis. Works of Briant Carant (2017), Cornwall (2014), Dhar (2018), Esquivel (2016), Koehler (2016), Razavi (2016), and Wilson (2017a) speak to colonial and capitalist logic that hypervisibilise women and girls in the development industry, which I refer to as *white, liberal feminisms*.

This thesis distinguishes 'international' and 'local' levels to differentiate development institutions and formal organisations from Bangladeshi youth; it is used in the Research Questions discussed below to specify that it is exploring across the development system. Yet, this thesis recognises the 'local' and 'international' domains as false constructs often held as a dichotomy, in which supposedly 'progressive'¹ norms originate in the international domain and 'traditional'² values belong only in the local domain. (This is particularly imagined by white, liberal feminisms.) This thesis will speak to the blurriness of this dichotomy and the indistinguishable nature of these concepts; in which norms and values that are imagined originating from only either the 'international' or 'local' are in actuality constructed by multiple spaces at once. Norm theory is useful in recognising that the international and local are spaces that interact with one another and sites that norms travel between, which is how similarities and differences in norm uptake occur. The interaction is why I give space to alignments and misalignments between the domains, whereby I explore the 'youth as agents of change' norm in the pursuit of gender equality norms: from 1) the SDGs, to 2) development actor response to the SDGs, to the ways that 3) 'youth agency' may be employed by young people in Bangladesh to pursue their own visions of 'gender equality'.

Rhetoric of, and response to, 'youth as agents of change' implies a vision of change that assumes the SDGs can be delivered based on certain framings of 'youth agency' to incite change. For this reason, this thesis locates an interrogation of 'youth as agents of change' onto exploring how 'youth agency' may be understood under such predetermined norms. Under these predetermined norms that set top-down agendas for contestable ideas of 'gender equality', 'women's empowerment', and broader

¹ 'Progressive' is used loosely in this thesis to speak to the endeavour of reforming society with a view for equality for all, particularly for groups that have faced historical marginalisation and oppression.

² 'Traditional' is a term used in this thesis to signify long-held social and cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes. It has historically been used in the white, liberal feminist imagination to patronise and homogenise the social, political, and economic status of the 'global south' in a racist manner, which this thesis explores.

social change, there is a question of what room there is for youth to envision or enact their own heterogeneous ideas of these concepts. Given the specific construction of youth agency in the SDG era, the research considers how young people who are engaged in feminism and activism understand and enact upon their *own* ideas of agency in pursuit of their *own* ideas of 'GEWE'. Putting literature on agency, structuration and contestation of norms in dialogue with one another provides an analytical lens for how youth agency in pursuit of their own ideas around how gender equality norms can/should change.

Bangladesh is the site through which I explore how individuals' youth agency interacts with international ideas of youth agency. Bangladesh demonstrates a complicated convergence of women's participation in the public sphere, neoliberal economic policy, and national-and-global feminist disjuncture with women-led unions and grassroots feminism. The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme offers up an example of how youth agency – and young people's placement in gender norm change – can be evidenced and constructed in particular ways. GAGE's evidence about Bangladesh and local gender equality norms supplements my investigation on how 'youth agency' may be employed by young people in Bangladesh. These findings are juxtaposed against the international-level responses to the SDGs through the domains of how youth are attributed, idealised gender equality norms, and the process of youth empowerment to enact change.

This thesis proposes 'youth agency in pursuit of gender equality' and 'gender equality' itself not as an objective concept but as norms that are comprised of rhetoric requiring contestation and interrogation. Youth agency is a concept that may be constructed in multiple, contesting ways: to justify white, liberal feminisms; to resist predetermined gender equality norms; or something in between. This research explores patterns of alignment or rejection – or a combination of these – between international and local ideas of 'youth agency to pursue gender equality norms'. This thesis captures the plural ways in which young people may navigate or resist gender norms in a manner that is outside what is suggested by the SDGs. It is an analysis that recognises the dynamic and micro-instances of youth agency. This differs from the planned, formal, or strategic ideals implied within 'youth as agents of change' and normative activism or advocacy in the development industry.

The inconsistencies between the gender politics of the SDG era and youth epistemes can apply beyond the example given of Bangladeshi youth. This thesis generates evidence that young people are valid dissident voices but not solely in the ways that are imposed upon them by the 'youth as agents of change' model or top-down constructions of 'agency' and 'gender norms'. Youth may resist, adapt, or

adopt the subjectivity of being 'agents of change' in favour of their own visions of 'gender', 'feminism', and 'empowerment' to self-determine their personal politics.

1.2 Research Questions

To explore youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms across the SDG era, this interrogation is deconstructed into answering the following research questions (RQs):

Research Question 1:

- Why do attributes of youth align and misalign across international and local levels?

Research Question 2:

- Why do gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?

Research Question 3:

- Why does youth empowerment to pursue gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?

1.2.1 Research findings and original contributions

This thesis is a multi-level contrasting analysis of international and local ideas of youth agency, to expose alignments and misalignments in how youth agency towards gender equality norms is imagined. By answering the research questions, this thesis has the following key findings and original contributions to gender and development knowledge:

Firstly, development actors' assumptions for how young people are embedded in the gender norm change process are based on liberalised and racialised justifications. Based on interviews with youth-centric NGO staff and a narrative analysis of development actor policy and programming (about gender and youth), I explore development actors' operationalisation of themes such as 'changemakers', 'empowerment', 'gender norms', and 'leadership' that are employed in the vision of 'youth as agents of [changing gender norms]'. The findings comprise my **original visualisation of the 'youth as agents of change' model**, which is embedded in white, liberal feminist rationale and demonstrates: 1) youth are homogenised as altruistic and 2) a normative role for youth engagement with politics, indicating that attributes of youth are imagined under racialised and spectacularised framings of a female-coded young change agent (RQ1); 3) that gender inequality lies in interpersonal

norms, meaning an individualised mode of social change enacted by youth rather than through collectivism or structural change (RQ2); and 4) assumptions of youth agency and empowerment which find an oversimplification of social change processes as a means to justify cost-efficient development solutions (i.e. rollback of the state in the name of citizen-led NGO-ised change) (RQ3).

Secondly, where the SDG era dictates the allocation of funding, resources, or social acceptability based on a singular positioning of 'youth', this thesis builds an understanding of the agency of youth that may wish to adapt or transgress these predetermined norms. Youth agency in pursuing gender equality norms is heterogeneous and contextually specific. **This thesis uses an original analytical lens of agency, structuration, and norms on data about young people in Bangladesh to produce evidence of youth agentic action on gender equality norms; a dynamic methodological contribution to investigate how young people may set out, and pursue, their own 'gender equality norms'**. This is valuable in recognising how their local youth agency is shaped by constraints and freedoms of their environment and life stage, thereby finding that these **urban affluent Bangladeshi youth perpetuate modernity and Western ethnocentricity in their gender equality norms**. This demographic may be described as generally 'progressive', but their class privilege led their views to be situated in similar discursive frameworks of white, liberal feminisms. They justify their gender equality norms because of the participants' headstrongness in the 'global as superior' and their belief they have the correct values to lead change. Their ideas of social progress - found from the online spaces they frequent - are given legitimacy in being communicated through the internet which is codified as global regardless of whether the contents' origin is in Bangladesh. The young people researched in this thesis uphold the valorisation of youth to enact change, particularly due to their purposeful navigation of generational and urban/global-led gaps in their lives and national contexts (RQ1). Differences against the 'youth as agents of change' model are, however, also found. Their ideal gender equality norms uphold liberal feminist ideas of inequality as existing in the individual domain, but these youth prioritise diverse masculinities and LGBTQ+ rights in their idea of gender equality (RQ2). This thesis presents the value in researching youth's digital lives because the participants share views on equality that are contentious in their offline worlds through their online personas, an act of agency to enact change in respect to their constraints. Participants engaged in a process of critical consciousness development and peer-led awareness raising which they attribute as key to how youth can be empowered to enact change (RQ3); generally similar to international development actor thinking on youth inclusion in development besides the notion that critical consciousness is a factor that is considered already existent in youth (as found in the 'youth as agents of change' model).

Finally, using the specific lens of youth agency in changing gender norms, this thesis offers up further evidence that exposes the disjuncture between international and local actors' norms when juxtaposed against one another. Though not entirely indistinguishable constructs, **the real disjuncture between the 'international' and the 'local' is from their limited interaction with one another**: from how there is a limited effort towards LGBTQ+ rights in development actor response to the SDGs (and the SDGs themselves) despite youth want for this; to how Bangladeshi national feminist organisations and the researched young people espouse an elitist feminism that disengages from rural, women-worker disputes; to how GAGE's intersectional lens in its research strategies do not extend to a criticism of the SDGs' capitalist and colonialist ideological underpinnings nor the neoliberalism of development funding politics. **The disjuncture is manifested in how development actors are placing youth in the same discursive frameworks as womanhoods found by the 'youth as agents of change' model**. This thesis provides further evidence in development literature that development architecture is underpinned by neoliberal politics³ and a racialised approach to who will *save the world*. The significance of these findings is as a contribution to feminist theory that development organisations and UN agencies are misplacing vast amounts of resources, funding, and energy – once onto womanhoods – now onto overburdening young people (Shain, 2013).

1.3 Exploring the 'Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence' programme

This thesis is born out of a partnership with the Overseas Development Institute's (ODI) Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) Programme. GAGE is a nine-year (2015-2024) mixed-methods longitudinal research and evaluation programme following the lives of over 18,000 adolescents (of varying socio-economic backgrounds, age, religion, disability status, etc.) in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal, Rwanda, Lebanon, Jordan, and previously Palestine. This section will explore connective points of interest between GAGE's themes and research strategies and those of this study which this thesis will subsequently draw out. This will include: 1) exploring the political context of GAGE, 2) reviewing how GAGE pursues its research aims, particularly those around voice and agency, through its research methodologies, and 3) this research's proposed contributions to GAGE.

Managed by ODI, GAGE is a consortium of institutions from Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, the UK and the US, and comprised of International/Regional Research Institutes and

³ Neoliberalism (and neoliberal politics) is an ideological framework which prioritises the free market to determine economic behaviour. This ultimately puts power into the hands of transnational corporations to control the market and withdraws the role of the state. It leads to deregulation of the market and rollback of state provisions and welfare spending. (Boyd 2016; Cornwall, 2018)

Universities, INGO/NGO partners, UN Agency Partners, and National Research Partners in the programmatic countries. The management team is proportionately represented by majority-world geographies. GAGE is funded by UK Aid (a funding programme of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)) and so is subject to changes in the strategic targeting of UK Aid spending by the UK Government (ODI, 2021). GAGE produces a variety of materials: journal articles, to thematic reports on adolescents in respective programmatic countries, to baseline and endline survey results, to evaluations on methodological tools to multimedia materials. GAGE is producing an evidence base so that "international and national actors can better promote adolescent agency and voice and fast-track adolescent well-being" (GAGE Consortium, 2021, p.1). And so, GAGE serves as an insightful example of a development actor's evidence base on youth agency.

GAGE recognises that "[young peoples'] voice, agency and community engagement... centres on [their] ability to meaningfully and safely participate in their household, school, and broader community" (Guglielmi et al., 2021a, p.2). It is this framework that acts as a guiding light for the thesis, in that a young person's capability to presumably act as an 'agent of change' that is suggested in the SDG era is based upon core aspects of *voice, agency, and community engagement*" (ibid, p.24). Though a standalone piece of research, this thesis sits in dialogue with the aims, activities, and findings of GAGE.

1.3.1 The funding politics of GAGE

GAGE is part of the UK Government's Adolescence Research Programme ARP, to contribute evidence to the FCDO. It has a total programme budget of over £25.8 million. This evidence will support FCDO (2021) to meet its core development objectives, including the SDGs', "what works" (p.16) for adolescent girls, and to "build back better after the Covid-19 pandemic" (p.17).

In UK Aid policy, girls' education is made out to be a silver bullet toward female empowerment. An educated girl of the 'global south' is assumed to be empowered, and thereby stereotyped as a selfless, entrepreneurial, rational economic agent (Khandaker, 2021). Her education is a means to invoke wider development outcomes: to eradicate poverty, prevent conflict, and reduce overpopulation (ibid). These themes are exemplified in the 2021 renewed efforts toward girls' education and progress on the UN Sustainable Development Goal on Education. There is an aim of getting 40 million more girls in school by 2026, and 20 million more girls reading by age 10 (FCDO, 2021). Addressing these targets is a £55 million pledge in pursuit of research into education reforms, the What Works Hub for Global Education, "to advise governments across Africa and Asia on the most impactful and cost-effective

ways to reform school systems and support female enrolment" (Prime Minister's Office and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2021, p.1). The programme is reasoned to "protect the UK from the consequences of conflict" (FCDO, 2021, p.8), and that "[when] girls are in the classroom and learning, [it] leads to smaller, healthier and better-educated families" (ibid, p.8). This is justified in rhetoric that states "just one additional year of secondary school, a woman's earnings can increase by a fifth" (ibid, p.8). Seen by the UK Government as an "untapped resource" (Prime Minister's Office and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2021, p.1), the lack of educational attainment in 'global south' girlhoods is imagined as the locus of global inequalities (Khandaker, 2021).

Themes of efficiency and effectiveness in development are pertinent to GAGE's responsibilities to the UK Government. FCDO's 2022 Annual Review of GAGE emphasises "policy-relevant research on what works" (p.1) and to "deliver good value for money" (p.5). Abbreviated as 'VFM' in the Annual Review (2022), value for money is a highly prioritised measure to "minimise costs and maximise outputs and uptake" (p.5). As well, GAGE's performance, inputs, and outputs are evaluated descriptively against categories of "Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness" (p.17). GAGE is subject to FCDO's numerical and descriptive scoring metrics. Indicators include "Number and description of instances where GAGE is invited to present evidence or analysis to policymakers and practitioners" (p.10) and "Number and description of knowledge products produced and published by GAGE... with policy- and programming-relevant messaging on 'what works' to enhance adolescent girls' capabilities" (p.17). It should also be noted a core quarterly performance indicator is the proportion of knowledge products that are authored or co-authored by researchers from LMIC research institutes – and cumulatively they have measured this figure to be over two-thirds representation (ibid). UK Aid strongly frames GAGE in line with cost effectiveness, whereby GAGE's performance is assessed by outputs over the quality of inputs.

Notably, FCDO cut overseas UK Aid expenditure by 29% in 2020 (Wintour, 2021a), despite the renewed efforts around girlhoods. The statutory requirement for overseas aid to be made from 0.7% of gross national income has been reduced to 0.5%, leading to a "substantial reduction of an estimated £3.5billion, and comes on top of a £0.7billion reduction between 2019 and 2020 as the UK economy contracted" (Hughes et al., 2021, p.2). New thematic categories outline new priority areas for FCDO, framed under 'value for taxpayers' (Financial Times, 2021), in which girls' education is included as a cost-efficient fix-all in light of aid reduction. Perhaps contradictorily, the 2021 commitment to girls' education is set at 400 million a year, where it was at 672million in the year of 2016 (Wintour, 2021b), and so fewer children are thought to be supported by UK Aid than in previous years (Mitchell et al.,

2021). FCDO has put aid agencies around the world in precarious positions, with no national partner consultation (Mamun, 2021). These aid cuts came just a year after the Department for International Development (DFID) and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) merger (forming the FCDO), to align the foreign aid budget under the UK's political and commercial interests⁴.

The UK state is thereby rolling back aid delivery to burden the responsibility of global development challenges onto young girlhoods of the 'global south'. She is assumed to become a self-governing subject to comply with the interests of the state and aid architecture (Richardson, 2005). This ideology is reflected in how GAGE's evidence base on adolescence and gender is sought to cover a wealth of themes that intersect with FCDO's interests: "GAGE addresses FCDO outlined global development challenges – improving the lives of women and girls, addressing humanitarian need, helping developing countries deal with Covid-19 and climate change" (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2022, p.7).

GAGE's funding politics thereby sits in contention with its ideological stance on intersectionality in youth-centric research. This contention plays out in GAGE's limited critiques of the SDGs, which the UK government has signed to meet. GAGE directly acknowledges the SDGs' failure to call for action on robust data to capture adolescent lives and needs. GAGE's critiques of the SDGs and standard development policy and practice relate to the technocratic domain. Given their emphasis on intersectionality in youth-centric research, why are there no ideological debates in GAGE's research that acknowledge the neoliberalism of the SDGs? It would be a line of argument that would inherently be in contention with UK Aid priorities. These considerations are fruitful to explore how youth agency in pursuing gender equality norms are imagined at the international level by GAGE.

1.3.2 GAGE research questions and activities

A longitudinal study like GAGE is rare due to the large-scale funding it requires. This section will review how GAGE pursues its research aims, particularly those around voice and agency, through its research methodologies. Voice and agency are one of several components of capabilities that GAGE holds as forming part of its overall conceptual framework, recognising the interconnectedness of the following three themes:

⁴ For the remainder of the text, I will use 'DFID' when referring to UKAID pre-2020.

“adolescents’ multidimensional capabilities...; the change strategies that are employed by families, communities, service providers, policy-makers, civil society and development partners to promote empowered and healthy transitions from adolescence into early adulthood; and finally the broader meso- and macro-level contexts that shape the enabling/constraining environments in which adolescent realities are played out” (Jones et al., 2019, p.1)

This conceptual framework (around young people’s realities and their relationship to gender norms) guides their research questions for the research and evaluation of adolescent lives which includes, but is not limited to, a question of “*How do different adolescents across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) experience the transition from childhood to adulthood?*” (GAGE Consortium, n.d.a, p.1). This question is of relevance to this thesis because it thematically includes interrogating how adolescents negotiate the gendered norms and expectations that shape their daily lives. And so, it is here that I situate this interrogation of potential thematic opportunities and gaps for this thesis to address.

To research capabilities, change strategies, and contexts of adolescent lives across the 6 programmatic countries, GAGE both analyses existent data and uses a mixed methods approach to collect and analyse original longitudinal quantitative and qualitative datasets. GAGE is collecting quantitative surveys across each country in 2017/2019, 2019/2021 and 2021/2023 to generate three rounds of data with adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19⁵. Qualitative data collection follows the preliminary analysis of the surveys so that the qualitative research tools are accurately informed of the participants’ lives (GAGE Consortium, n.d.b).

The wealth of anticipated data generated gives credence to recurrent usage of large-scale quantitative surveying across their research sites, particularly to the production of baseline, midline, and endline evidence. Large-scale quantitative surveying benefits from the generalisability of the data analysis, an important attribute for a global-level research study. Yet, like with much large-scale numerical surveying, participant responses are bounded by the limits of the answer formats, be they tick boxes, numerical ratings, or Likert scales. The aggregation of respondent answers hides the complexity of themes around agency, voice, decision-making, and experiences of gender norms. Such an onus on large-scale quantitative research is limited in its data collection and analysis towards producing a nuanced evidence base of multifaceted concepts around lived experience of gender and agency. The baseline survey serves mostly to collect more personal information that is more demographical than

⁵ It is the 2017/19 Bangladesh baseline survey raw datasets that have been of particular use in this thesis.

relevant to the complexity of navigating social norms. There is much debate on measuring poverty and livelihoods, wherein measuring indexes may arbitrarily flatten normative elements of living standards to be equivalent, e.g. the Multidimensional Poverty Index equals child mortality with asset ownership, masking their multifaceted components and connections (Santos and Alkire, 2011). Similarly, GAGE lists various durable goods owned by the household (wardrobe, non-mobile phone, television, working car), all of which are attributed with the same scaling. This fails to capture, for example, the decision-making behind why a household would own one asset over the other. In the GAGE Baseline Survey, responses to the statement "women who participate in politics or leadership positions cannot also be good wives or mothers" are limited to 'agree', 'partially agree', 'do not agree' (as well as 'no response/refusal to answer' or 'don't know') (Baird et al., 2019, p.36). The respondent may have complex, contextually specific answers or want to offer up clarifications that could provide insightful caveats into how they view or experience gender, all of which is lost in such a format.

Following-up quantitative research with qualitative data provides a connection between quantitative responses and their respondents' contexts and motivations, yet gaps remain in capturing the participants who cannot be followed up between these research stages (Morgan, 2014). GAGE research acknowledges that not all research questions require a mixed analysis, and so the integration of the qualitative and quantitative is used only where appropriate (Baird et al., 2021a). As another caveat in the domain of mixed methods, longitudinal research: the deeply contextualised data that comes from qualitative methods and analysis is dynamic in the long run, whereby the meanings attributed to the data and the contexts of their origin will change over time (Baird et al., 2021a) and serve a different purpose to quantitative data as historical evidence.

Given these varied considerations across both quantitative and qualitative methods, GAGE's research strategies still demonstrate the value of a holistic approach to producing an evidence base on GAGE's aims. Baird et al. (2021a) propose that the mixed-methodological strategy of GAGE allows for a variety of elements core to the aims and conceptual framework of GAGE, such as: capturing the multidimensionality of adolescent capabilities, maintaining both breadth and depth in a large-scale rigorous study, and the inclusion of diverse perspectives and marginalised communities, in an ethical manner. Young people who are often overlooked in pre-existing evidence bases – such as national demographic and health surveys – may be included through GAGE's adaptive research strategies regarding marginalised and/or disabled participants. This is regarded as a 'mosaic approach' that recognises not all methods may be appropriate for all young people.

The scale and time length of GAGE's research strategy is not entirely incompatible with that of doctoral research. Rather, it is here that I can offer a smaller-scale, nuanced study to look deeper into the intricacies of *some* young peoples' realities and navigation of gender (and gender equality) norms, thereby still feeding into their broader research aims.

1.3.3 This research's contributions to GAGE

From its funding body to its survey tools, GAGE is a rich case study for a development actor's evidence base on youth agency. My methodological insights into GAGE have given this study the impetus to deliver a deeply nuanced, small-scale evidence base on how young people's agency may be investigated. Using research about the GAGE programme itself (in the empirical chapters) and a light-touch review of GAGE's Bangladesh publications and broader scholarly knowledge of gender in Bangladesh (in Chapter Two), this thesis builds upon GAGE's existing research findings and addresses GAGE's thematic gaps around youth agency.

This partnership has allowed me access to GAGE's raw data selected from the 2017/2018 GAGE Baseline Survey for Adult females (Baird et al., 2019), onto which I have conducted my own original analysis. Original analyses of GAGE raw data and a survey tool initiate this thesis' methodological pursuit of young peoples' own ideas around gender equality norms and how this may be impacted by community norms. The findings from this analysis will also serve as evidence of local ideas of gender norms and agency to shift these norms. Though I am not looking for generalisable findings to complement GAGE, I can prove the deeply contextual, temporal, and identity-specific ways in which youth agency and their visions around gender equality norms emerge. As well, I have analysed the questions and methods used in the data collection and external survey tools which GAGE cited as foundational for their questionnaires to understand international-level ideas of youth agency. This research phase is explained in further detail in section 1.5.1.1 ('Original analyses of GAGE datasets and questionnaires').

This research's contributions to GAGE are as follows: 1) further evidence to present a nuanced representation of youth beyond development actor imagination, using a different study demographic (urban, affluent Bangladeshi youth); 2) evidence on what youth in said demographic envision as their ideal gender equality norms, given youth views of gender equality norms themselves are not included in GAGE's work; and 3) assessing GAGE's critiques of youth roles in development processes as shaped by funding politics. These contributions serve to present evidence on how youth agency in pursuing

gender equality norms is heterogeneous and contextually specific. As well, this thesis' dialogue with GAGE as an international actor is fruitful to explore the disjuncture between international and local ideas of youth agency, as an example of how large-scale development actors are limited in their criticisms of the neoliberal domain due to the funding politics.

1.4 Field sites

Bangladesh is the site through which I exemplify the way that local individuals' youth agency may misalign with, or take up, international ideas of youth agency. Bangladesh was chosen as a field site for two core reasons: as the most feasible of the GAGE programmatic countries to conduct research in; and being British Bangladeshi, Bangladesh is a cultural context with which I have a personal familiarity. Data collected by GAGE on Bangladeshi rural youth's perceptions of gender norms has provided the basis on which I asked young people not only about gender norms but chose to explore their ideas about who incites change and how this is achieved. Affluent urban youth present a demographic that had not yet been extensively researched by GAGE, with insights that paint a more nuanced picture of young Bangladeshi lives.

Being British Bangladeshi, Bangladesh is a cultural context which I have a deep personal familiarity with and so informs my knowledge of its social and political environment. Naturally, for this same reason, the UK is a space that I am also accustomed to in terms of its social and political environment. I am familiar with the 'youth as agents of change' norm in the UK context, as I have a background in being a 'UK youth advocate' on the SDGs for Restless Development (an international development organization). Though I was unable to recruit young people in the UK, I interviewed a staff member from a UK-based youth-centric NGO. As well, this study shines a light on GAGE's relationship with UK Government funding. And so, the UK also provides a lens to understand the SDG era's imagination of 'youth as agents of changing gender equality norms'.

With Bangladesh as the main case study, the thesis is enriched by the extensive body of research around women's empowerment and gender equality in Bangladesh, such as works by Siwan Anderson and Mukesh Eswaran (2009), Deborah Balk (1997), Naila Kabbeer (2011), Sohela Nazneen (2011; 2017; 2018), and Janet Raynor (2005). This literature is reviewed to provide background context of gender equality norms in Bangladesh and to frame GAGE's research on Bangladesh, in Chapter Two.

1.5 Research Methodology

The partnership with ODI's GAGE was the investigative jumping-off point for this research, in which GAGE's research centres on youth voice, agency, and capabilities. This section discusses the four phases of research that, together, comprise the evidence presented in this thesis: analyses of GAGE datasets and questionnaires; narrative analysis of 'youth as agents of change' rhetoric across development actors in the SDG era; interviews with youth-centric NGOs; and research activities with young people.

Each research phase comes together to provide a combined, multi-level response to each RQ. This is demonstrated in the diagram below, as Figure 1. This research does not seek to assert the reality of institutional response to youth-led change or clarify what is 'gender norm change' (in a prescriptivist manner). This research seeks to understand patterns of alignment or rejection – or a combination of these – between youth perceptions of change/ their role in change and development actor response to the validated norms of the SDGs. Together, these four phases of research uncover the reasons behind international and local level alignment and disjuncture.

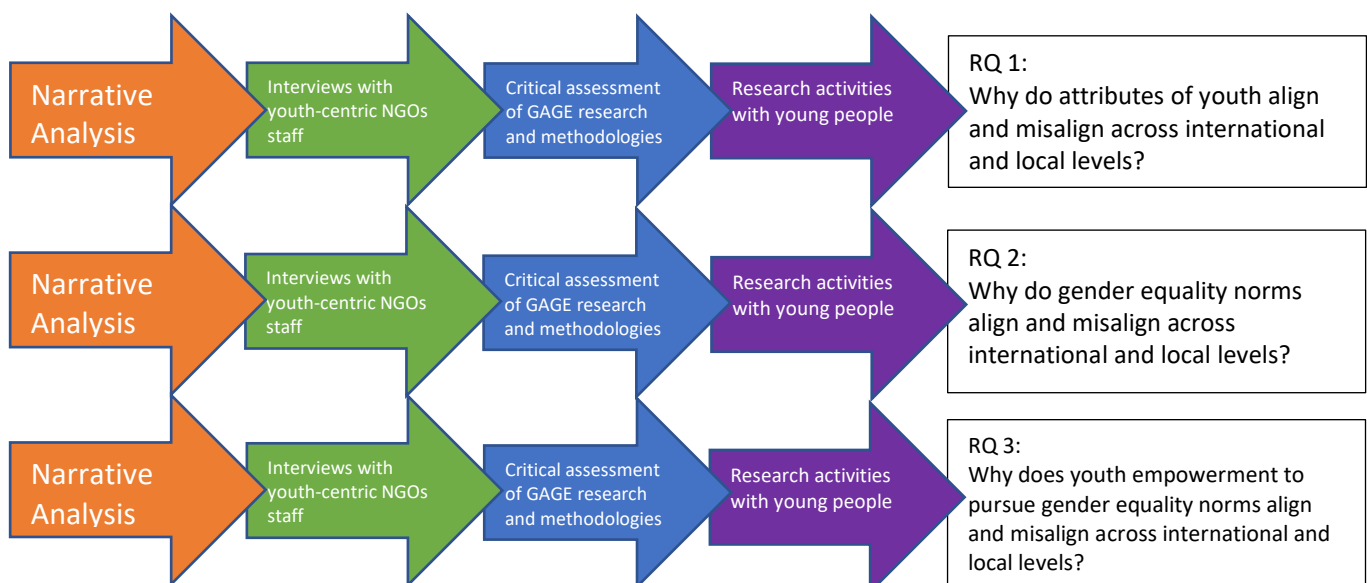


Figure 1: visualisation of how research phases answer each research question

1.5.1 Analyses of GAGE research and methodologies

The empirical chapters include analyses of the GAGE programme to explore how an international research programme frames youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms. GAGE publications provide secondary data on GAGE's evidence of youth attributes and how GAGE itself critiques youth

agency in change processes, answering RQ 1 (Why do attributes of youth align and misalign across international and local levels?) and 3 (Why does youth empowerment to pursue gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?).

1.5.1.1 Original analyses of GAGE datasets and questionnaires

This section will explain how this thesis has been built up by accessing GAGE's data, and then adding my own original, robust, analysis. This research phase involves original analyses of 1) GAGE raw datasets and 2) the questionnaire that collected this data – 2017/18 GAGE Baseline Survey for Adult Female Respondents (Baird et al., 2019)⁶ – and affiliated questionnaires (the Young Lives Older and Younger Cohort Round 2-5 India studies (2006; 2009; 2014a; 2014b; 2017a; 2017b) and the Baseline Global Early Adolescence Survey in Indonesia (2019)). The original analysis of secondary raw datasets becomes evidence of how gender equality norms are envisioned at the local level, answering RQ 2 (Why do gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?). I identify the commonly questioned (and unquestioned) aspects of gender experiences and relations by GAGE itself as an international actor, also answering RQ 2 through the international level aspect. This can highlight key data points not captured in GAGE's research to inform my subsequent research activities, which are explored in this section.

Using SPSS software, I analysed raw datasets from the 2017/2018 GAGE Baseline Survey for Adult Female Respondents (Baird et al., 2019), from ODI's GAGE Programme, using a household questionnaire. The data from this cohort year was the most recently available dataset made available to me by GAGE, when I conducted the research in 2020. The data was collected in Dhaka, Bangladesh with 1792 adult female (AF) respondents, who were the adult female household members and caregivers of GAGE's adolescent Core Respondents (young people born between 2000-2007) in the longitudinal study. The AF respondents hold a median age of marriage of 15. This research gives an insight into the kinds of values and norms which shape much of the Dhaka context. This includes gender and social practices regarding the household, access to credit, role in household decision-making, and attitudes and social norms and expectations in the community. Though there were also 2017/2018 baseline surveys with adult males, the community, and core respondents (i.e. the young participant), the data from the AF respondents were most relevant to the thesis' themes of gender norms and agency to enact change (manifested in this data as community expectations).

⁶ The raw datasets and survey tool are publicly archived and available to download via the UK Data Service.

I also analysed the questions used on this 2017/18 GAGE Baseline Survey for Adult Female Respondents (Baird et al., 2019), regarding young people born between 2000-2007, to understand what kind of data I can complement with GAGE's study. I deepened this understanding by looking into the questions used by the Young Lives India studies (2006; 2009; 2014a; 2014b; 2017a; 2017b) and the Baseline Global Early Adolescence Survey (2019) in Indonesia as the GAGE Baseline Survey referenced drawing inspiration from these organisations regarding their questions about gender norms. This process enabled me to draw out findings that were relevant to the aims of this research as well as uncover potential data gaps in GAGE's research. These analyses inform my investigative approach and the line of questioning in my primary research. The questionnaires demonstrated the need for multiple, informal and in-depth interviews with each participant as these were generative for studying people's experiences and understandings of social phenomena (Mason, 2002).

Based on my original analysis, emerging thematic gaps that may be relevant for this thesis include reorienting questioning on gender norms and community expectations to appropriately aged younger people; akin to the Young Lives studies (2006; 2009; 2014a; 2014b; 2017a; 2017b) and the Baseline Global Early Adolescence Survey (2019). I can question whether and in what ways the young participants feel they can broach certain topics around gender norms with their families, communities, and peers. This would bring to light an expansion of how young people see gender norms for themselves, in their communities, and whether this is reflected in what happens in actuality.

Owing to my original analysis of the GAGE datasets and a survey tool, much consideration is to be given to participants' personal visions for gender equality norms, the ways they perceive communally held gender equality norms, and how they enact gender equality norms in the face of what others think. In exploring the ways that this study's participants may transgress gender norms, community expectations *and* parental expectations are necessary lines of inquiry. I can include topics that would ask them to reflect on whether their answers would be different if they were a different gender and compare how these responses differ across gender, thereby compiling young peoples' differing values that may complement or transgress 'GEWE' norms. By exploring the process of youth challenging gender norms, rather than what the gender norms themselves are, this thesis goes beyond the remit of GAGE's research aims.

This research phase was undertaken from May to June 2020.

1.5.2 Narrative analysis of development actor rhetoric

1.5.2.1 *Research Aims and Justification*

The rhetorical notion of ‘youth as agents of change’ employed by development actors’ policies, research recommendations, and programmatic toolkits is under interrogation in this research phase. To address the RQs, it is necessary to interrogate development actors’ assumptions about young people’s capabilities and nature, idealised gender equality norms, and how youth empowerment is embedded in the change process. This research phase explores the way that, in the SDG era, the global youth population is constructed through the norm of ‘agent of change’.

This portion of the study compiles a cross-development agency narrative that interrogates the nexus of youth, gender, and the ‘youth as agents of change’ rhetoric across a variety of development actors’ policy/programmatic documents, in the post-2015 era⁷. I conducted a narrative analysis of development actors’ language in policy and programming documents, facilitated by NVivo software, to unpack the norms behind how ‘youth as agents of change’ is employed by development actor policies, research recommendations, programmatic toolkits, etc. This approach exemplifies how youth are justified to incite change towards the pursuit of ‘GEWE’ through the operationalisation of terms around ‘changemakers’, ‘empowerment’, ‘gender norms’, ‘leadership’, etc.

In this study, I define development actors as international NGOs, government agencies, UN bodies, and coalitions between NGOs and supranational organisations (Richey and Ponte, 2014). Given the different types of organisations included in this narrative analysis, there is scope to demonstrate the heterogeneity of the ‘youth as agents of change’ narrative. The variety of sources – grey literature, research reports, evaluation reports, programme reports, blogs, toolkits, or policy guidance – are mostly internal documents. Though publicly available, these kinds of documents serve a purpose, as they are produced for the benefit of the organisation itself or its funding bodies, rather than acting as campaign materials.

The documents cover the post-2015 era of the SDGs but do not all cover policy or programming that intends to directly achieve or monitor the SDGs because the norms of the SDGs both inform development architecture and vice versa. This approach demonstrates how the SDGs inform actors in

⁷ I use ‘post-2015’ to refer to the 2015-2030 period in which the SDGs are ‘active’, by being implemented and monitored.

the development architecture and these actors also inform(ed) the formation, monitoring and implementation of the SDGs (Engberg-Pedersen et al., 2019). This analysis does not have the scope to determine how these norms will be practised by each respective development actor.

Narrative analysis is an apt methodological approach to bring to light how norms are translated and perpetuated by development actors: it is exploratory; it is based on few, but significant sources; and its qualitative nature allows for nuance and contextualisation of terms (Allen, 2017). To analyse the operationalisation of terms around 'youth as agents of change' (i.e. 'gender equality', 'youth leadership', 'activism', 'patriarchy', etc) in organisational documents is a fluid process. This allows for the raw data results to inform the latter coding phases, which highlights unexpected results but also gives unintentional weighting to some sources or search terms over others (ibid).

To compile a cross-development actor narrative that interrogates the nexus of youth, gender, and the 'youth as agents of change' rhetoric is in itself originality in the literature that critically interrogates the white, liberal feminisms of development logic (Switzer, 2013; Dyer, 2015; Desai, 2016; Boyd, 2016; Briant Carant, 2017; and Prügl, 2017). It provides a niche insight into the consistencies – or lack thereof – across the development industry made up of various types of organisations (i.e. supranational organisations, non-governmental organisations, organisations operating nationally etc.) regarding how youth may be constructed in the imagination of various development actors.

1.5.2.2 *Sampling strategy*

Sources for the analysis required the following characteristics:

- Materials that were written by/or on behalf of: adult-led development organisations/consortiums that worked on at least two of the following topics: 'youth', 'gender', 'SDGs'
- Publication types: grey literature; research reports; evaluation reports; programme reports; blogs; toolkits; or policy guidance.
- Years: 2015-2020
- Language: English
- Publication status: Published, Working Papers
- Geography: 'Upper-', 'middle-', 'low-income' countries⁸

⁸ As identified by the World Bank (n.d.)

I employed two methods in sampling sources for analysis: 1) identifying organisations that would have appropriate materials, and 2) directly sourcing materials from multiple search engines. For the former, I snowballed from pre-existing knowledge of relevant organisations. Upon finding appropriate organisations, a search was conducted in their respective websites' internal search engines for a source to analyse, using the search term, "youth change agents gender Sustainable Development Goals". Regarding the latter sampling method, a systematic search was performed using the following search engine databases: Google, UN Digital Library, Development Alternative, World Bank database, and the Youth Power database. The following search terms were used:

youth
adolescence
young people
change agents
agents of change
youth empower/ment
young leaders
youth-led
youth development
generation 2030
gender
gender equality
female / women's empowerment
gender norms
gender norm change
women's agency

Table 1: narrative– analysis – search terms for sources

The two methods in the process of sampling sources produced 133 total entries⁹. After sifting for relevancy, the final number of documents selected for review was 42, representing 40

⁹ Based on the first two pages of the search engine result from each search term.

organisations/organisational partnership/consortiums¹⁰. Most sources represent a different organisation each, and some organisations have been represented by two materials. The selected documents represent organisations that operate mostly on the international level, and some operate across their national contexts. For the sake of brevity, the national-level organisations are rolled into the international level, to juxtapose the local domain in the analysis.

The final list of documents that were analysed for this study, alongside relevant information is found in Annex 1.

1.5.2.3 Analytical strategy

To analyse the narratives of the documents, each document was read, thereby deducting prominent occurring themes. Then, the following themes were used as search terms, for the 'word search' function on NVivo software:

Youth as agents of change
Gender inequality
gender equality
women's empowerment
theory/vision of change
advocate /advocacy
child-centred
boy-centred
girl-centred
empower/ment, agency
engagement, participation
input, output, outcome
justice
leadership, youth-led
rights

¹⁰ Some organisational partnerships and consortiums were comprised of organisations that were already represented in this study as a singular entity, e.g. Plan International and the Working Group on Youth-Inclusive Governance Indicators (Restless Development, UNDP, Plan International, the Children's Environments Research Group (CUNY), the Centre for Children's Rights (Queen's University Belfast)).

social, gender, harmful, cultural norms
youth, young people, children, adolescent
boys, young man
girls, young woman
Youth as data collectors
Youth-sensitive service delivery
Kinship role negotiation

Table 1: narrative analysis – emergent themes used for 'word searching' in analysis

The results of this word search were coded under these respective search terms. By linking thematically similar codes through axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 2008), the findings were re-coded again into 4 broader themes of 'gender norms/gender inequality', 'empowerment/agency', 'advocacy/accountability', and 'who counts as youth'. These findings pinpoint the ways youth are imagined in the SDG era and how development actors justify 'youth as agents of change'.

This research phase was undertaken between July to September 2020.

1.5.3 Interviews with youth-centric NGOs

1.5.3.1 Research Aims and Justification

This thesis also presents findings from interviews with staff members from 3 youth-oriented NGOs. The interviews provide a more in-depth interrogation of the narrative analysis's themes, but as found in 3 specific youth-centric NGOs. This research activity uncovers why youth-centred NGOs use the mandate of 'youth as agents of change' in the pursuit of 'GEWE' when delivering programmatic and policy action towards achieving the SDGs. Interviews proved useful to probe the participants' justifications for NGO policy, in a detailed way that may not be found in published grey literature on their organisations' policy.

This research phase investigated “to what extent, and how, do Bangladeshi and UK youth-centric organisations centre youth to be 'agents of change' (in pursuing 'gender equality') and why?”. This sought to capture the international aspect of all three RQs (youth attributes, gender equality norms, and youth empowerment to pursue gender equality norms). Yet, all the NGOs interviewed operated only at the national level. The analysis found, however, their values reinforced those of the narrative analysis. For the sake of brevity, their findings are rolled into the international domain. Single, 60–90-minute semi-structured online interviews were conducted with three participants – each a representative from UK/Bangladeshi youth-oriented NGOs. Two of the participants were from Bangladeshi organisations, an affiliate of GAGE. The other participant was from a UK organisation. In this thesis, they will be referred to as Actor A, Actor B, and Actor C – Actors A and B are located in Bangladesh and Actor C is in the UK.

The research aims were as follows:

- How and why are organisations proposing and taking action on the pursuit of ‘GEWE’?
- What are the broad attitudinal and demographic characteristics of the young people that the organisations engage with?
- In what ways do they see these youth challenging gender norms (in their policy and programming) and are there barriers to these processes?
- According to the participants, what line of questioning can I pursue with young people regarding their capacity to be ‘agents of changing gender norms’?

1.5.3.2 Study population and recruitment

The research participants were 3 adult employees of 3 different non-governmental organisations that work with youth on 'gender equality', 'women's empowerment', and/or the SDGs across the UK and Bangladesh. Research participants were recruited as follows: Firstly, through online snowballing methods and pre-existing knowledge, I identified appropriate non-governmental organisations in the UK and Bangladesh working on the aforementioned topics. Secondly, I emailed these organisations to inform them of my research, asking them to be directed to an employee whom they deemed suitable. Finally, upon being given the email contact details of the potential participant, I emailed an information sheet and a consent form to be signed and emailed back to me.

1.5.3.3 Research methods

The research was conducted as 1 round of 60-90 minutes interviews per participant, in December 2020. The interviews were conducted online, using Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and/or Zoom, due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. The interviews were semi-structured, with a prepared list of questions to ask the participants, in which questions were altered in accordance with the participants' answers. Interviews were audio-recorded, which was subject to the participants' consent, and I recorded observational notes throughout the interviews.

The line of questioning involved the young people they work with (regarding social demographics, political and social values, and life histories) and what they believe about these young people's capacity to challenge 'gender norms' in their personal relationships, communities, or nations. I enquired about the ways they embed youth perspectives and experiences in the NGOs' programming and policy delivery, and the extent to which their objectives align with the SDGs. I consulted with the participants on the line of questioning I could employ in later research around how youth perceive their role in 'gender norm change'. The interview guide can be found in Annex 2. When questioning, I altered the questions based on my light-touch research of each participants' NGO's website to gain context of their policy and programming.

1.5.3.4 Analysis and use of research data

I analysed transcriptions of the interview recordings, using a thematic analytical approach. I identified recurring data points as themes and applied these themes to the research aims. The language used by the participants uncovered the kind of ideology and assumptions that are built into the NGO programmes' inputs and desired outcomes and the origins of these ideas. This data provides evidence of what 'youth as agents of change' means, what it involves, and how youth's behaviour may be regulated all to pinpoint what is considered the 'idealised' youth by a myriad of development actors.

As the pilot primary data collection phase, a consideration in this study is the methodological robustness of conducting a study involving youth/gender-centric NGOs and interrogating 'youth as agents of change' around gender equality norms. I used the interview answers to inform my later research, in which I was advised to be more specific in the questions I ask concerning how young people navigate 'gender norms'.

1.5.4 Research activities with young people

1.5.4.1 *Research Aims and Justification*

This second primary research phase sought to identify how concepts of 'gender norms', 'gender norm change' and 'agency' are experienced and understood by young people in the UK and Bangladesh. I sought to explore how youth lives, knowledge, and experience may complement, or subvert, the expectations set out by international-level ideas of 'youth as agents of change'. This includes collecting data on why or why not young people may be seeking 'change' in their lives regarding gender and how have they transgressed gender 'norms'.

The aims are split into three thematic groups: 1) young people's perceptions of gender norm change and agency; 2) young people's opportunities or challenges to transgress gender norms; and 3) youth reflections on the SDGs and the envisioned role of 'young people as agents of change'. Across these themes, I sought to collect data on young people's heterogeneous deployment of terms around 'gender norms', 'gender norm change' and 'agency'.

The first thematic aim, on young people's perceptions of gender norm change and agency, is comprised of the following questions:

- What does 'change' around 'gender norms' look like to them and how does it vary among young people?
- To what extent do young people believe that change is possible?
- (How) do they define gender inequity or norms in their communities? In what areas of life do they feel they face inequalities?
- Do they challenge gender rules, why/why not?
- Who has a responsibility to incite change? And in what areas?
- Understanding of 'agency' as their decision-making ability, freedom of movement, and ability to speak their mind in their homes and with peers.
- Young peoples' personal visions for their futures and for society, respectively.

Beyond their perceptions of 'gender norm change', I also collected data on young people's opportunities or challenges to transgress gender norms in their everyday lives. I break this topic down into the following:

- What are the gendered rules, attitudes, and expectations in kinship roles and the community? What do they think of community perceptions on transgressing these?
- What are their perceived opportunities for inciting 'gender norm change' in their lives, communities, and in public service delivery?
- Who do they feel are the gatekeepers and decision-makers in their communities? What of the influence of their parents?
- What are the covert opportunities/challenges in public service delivery for youth to incite change?
- What are the covert opportunities for change in youths' everyday spaces and relationships, which comprises youth agency?

Finally, I interrogate 'youth as agents of change' by collecting adolescent responses to, and reflections on being, 'agents of change' and their perceived capacity to act as 'agents of changing gender norms' under the validated norms of the SDGs. I phrase this as 'the validated norms of the SDGs' in anticipation of any familiarity with the SDGs. This research aim is broken down as:

- How do young people reflect on 'norm change' as the SDGs' answer to 'GEWE'?
- What is 'GEWE' to them? Where have they heard this from?
- What is young people's understanding of the SDG agenda, reflections on selected targets relating to gender, and suggestions for thematic gaps?

Together, these three thematic areas provide a line of questioning that 1) finds how the young people imagine youth themselves (addressing RQ 1: Why do attributes of youth align and misalign across international and local levels?); 2) maps out participants' gender equality norms onto those set out by international level ideas of 'youth as agents of change' (addressing RQ 2: Why do gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?); and 3) unpacks the process of personal change and empowerment experienced by the young people, in developing their capacity to enact social change (addressing RQ 3: Why does youth empowerment to pursue gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?). This research phase provides insights into *why* the young people I research hold views that both complement, and oppose, the norms of the SDGs.

This research phase comprised of multiple stages, embedded with these above aims: 2 rounds of online individual interviews; a drawing/photography activity based on specific prompts (e.g. something you want to change); and a 14-day diary activity based on the prompt 'provide 2-3

highlights of the day and how did they make you feel' and an option for them to include a social media page/s that was of interest to them. The use of various stages of data collection with different methods gives way to triangulating findings: the comparison, contrast, and integration of datasets from different methods in the analytical phase will capture different aspects of the research issue and assure the validation of findings (Flick, Kardorff, & Steinke, 2004; Denscombe, 2010). Practically, triangulation occurs by putting the results of different data source analyses in relation to one another (Flick, 2007). And so, I could piece together a holistic view of the young people's lives and their gender equality norms, that is contextually specific to these young people only.

This study valorises young people – and the mundanity of their everyday lives – to be an epistemic community themselves. The routine, unremarkable aspects of everyday life provide valuable data to enrich the understanding of the cultural norms and expectations that research participants live under in the era of SDGs and 'youth as agents of change'. Qualitative, creative methods allow participants to construct the unconfined articulation of their own reality and represent their truth through their own means, rather than narrowly defining their lived experience through on-the-spot responses or researcher-defined tick boxes. I collected and coded the data with the understanding that 'gender norms' (and 'agency') are subjective, experienced and deeply embedded in society as covert and overt phenomena (Mills et al., 2010).

1.5.4.2 Sample size and sampling frame

Participants in the study were sought to be 14–19-year-old young people of all genders that live across the UK and in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Participants represent young people that are interested in, or have experience, in advocating for 'gender norm change'. They did not need to be familiar with the institutionalization of SDG targets or discourse of 'youth as agents of change'. The chosen age range is based on the common age at which young people may be included in advocacy and activism networks and youth-based organisations; based on pre-existing knowledge and confirmed spontaneously from the documents of the narrative analysis. This specified age range ensured more appropriate targeting of young people that are involved in activism and advocacy. Such participants are likely to have a lot to say about being 'youth as agents of change' or their own ideas about what gender equality looks like to them, because of the popularity of the discourse in youth advocacy spaces.

Due to the restrictions of the online world, I was unable to use field-based search techniques, i.e. physically searching for potential participants. I relied on a purposeful sampling approach and a chain-referral approach (Bernard, 2011) in contacting GAGE's Bangladeshi contacts and partners comprising youth-centric NGOs and schools. I approached these possible adult gatekeepers over email, suggesting that they could pass on information about the study to young people they deem suitable. From the three contacts that GAGE's in-country investigator suggested, one of which was an English Medium School in Dhaka, where I was able to recruit participants.

I also kept in contact with the three participants from the youth-centric NGO interviews, to ask for their referral for potential participants. This is how I found one of my participants, who was affiliated (as a youth advocate) with one of the Bangladeshi youth-centric NGOs I had interviewed.

To recruit UK participants, I emailed schools in the Leeds area with interests in youth advocacy as well as NGOs and youth agency in the UK with youth advocacy programming. In this way, I would be in contact with the adult gatekeeper to potential young participants. Ultimately, I was unable to recruit any young people from the UK. I recruited 7 participants – 4 males, 3 females – 6 from (a Dhaka-based) English Medium School (aged 14-16), 1 youth advocate with a Bangladeshi youth-centric NGO (based in Dhaka) (aged 19). And so, I had a small-scale exploratory sample to research for this study. The participants were affluent and urban-based. They did not all directly engage in the implementation of the SDGs' pursuit of gender norm change through participating in youth accountability networks/NGO-invited spaces. They all, however, shared a deep interest in and knowledge of feminisms, gender equality, and social change.

Participants have been given pseudonyms and are identified as follows: 3 boys (Asif, Yusuf, Faisal) and 3 girls (Radhika, Rumena, Saima) aged 14-16 from an English Medium School in Dhaka; and 1 young male (Protik) aged 19 who is an activist, based in Dhaka, from a Bangladeshi youth-oriented NGO.

1.5.4.3 Research Methods

The research methods were as follows:

1. 60-90 minutes for Individual Interview Round 1 (including 10 min break)
2. 60-90 minutes for Individual Interview Round 2 (including 10 min break)
3. Photograph, draw, or find a picture on the internet in the public domain of 6 prompts (in their own time, following the interviews)

4. Record short daily diaries (over a 14-day period, directly following the Interviews), with the aid of prompts.

All 4 activities were carried out with each participant individually, in the March-April 2021 period. I negotiated with each respective participant the appropriate time and dates to conduct each task.

Research activity 1: Individual Interview Round 1

I conducted 2 rounds of semi-structured individual interviews using online video chat means, such as through Microsoft Teams, Skype, Zoom, or via phone call – whichever suited the individual participant. The interviews ranged from about 60-90 minutes. I conducted the interviews myself and a translator was not necessary. The semi-structured interviews were informal and conversational, to not intimidate the participant, and allowed me to gather data on unexpected themes dependent on the answers of the participant.

In this first round of interviews, I sought to address the first thematic aim around young people's perceptions of gender norm change and agency. And so, questions in the Round 1 of the interviews pertained to the following subjects:

- About the participant and their social networks
- About the gender roles they may have learnt
- Perceived agency and decision-making ability to challenge gender norms
- Visions for society
- Visions for their personal futures

Questions captured life histories, reflections on their past ability to negotiate gender norms, and aspirations (for gender norms) in the future. These questions included "Do your parents or other adults in your life have an interest in community, local, or national politics or activism?" and "Name 3 things you would change about society"). I used Likert scales based upon GAGE's use of Likert scales as a 5-point scale for participants to express the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements concerning their perceived agency and decision-making ability to challenge gender norms (e.g. "I am able to speak my mind in my family home"). I developed the Likert scale statements myself, but the kinds of gender norms they encapsulated – e.g. "I am able to tell my peers to change their minds regarding:... women and girls having their own savings" – came from the gender norms discussed in the GAGE questionnaires around: girls' schooling; girls' behaviours; comparisons between girls and boys; marriage and the household; work; and finances. I did not include themes of non-

marital romantic relationships and girls' sexual lives or IPV due to the sensitive nature of the topics. The Likert scale statements required a response of one of the following from the participants: strongly agree, mildly agree, neither agree nor disagree, mildly disagree, strongly disagree. These components are necessary to understand what participants define and recognise as inequality, their agency, gender norms they live under, opportunities and challenges for gender norm change in their everyday lives, and what they would like to see change (if anything).

This research wrestles with the tension of interrogating contestable concepts like 'gender', 'norms', and 'agency'. The interviews were an opportunity to get an understanding of the types of terms that are deployed by the participants with regard to 'gender', 'norms' and 'agency'. I asked about domains of life without specifically referring to the aforementioned concepts. For example, I could relate to themes of the past (i.e. their experiences and being younger, what they made of society in the past), the present (i.e. what they make of society now), and the future (i.e. their aspirations, what they envision society will look like) or physical spaces (experiences of gender in school, being transgressive in the home etc.).

All 7 young people participated in the Individual Interview Round 1. I also used this introductory interview to get to know the participants as individuals, so that they could become accustomed to me, and talk further about the subsequent research activities. The interview guide can be found in Annex 3.

Research activity 2: Individual Interview Round 2

In the second round of interviews, I sought to address thematic aims 2 and 3. Questions and activities in this interview guide pertained to the following subjects:

- Gender rules, attitudes, and expectations in kinship roles and in the community
- Structural, institutional, and social barriers they may face
- How do they define/recognise gender inequality
- Participants' experience of hearing about 'GEWE' in their lives
- Who has a responsibility to incite change? And in what areas?
- Participants' perceptions and opportunities for inciting 'gender norm change' in their lives, communities, and in public service delivery themselves
- Reflections on the validated norms of the SDGs

I was initially hesitant about using loaded terms around 'gender' and 'empowerment' in the research activities with young people, given the youth-centric NGO interviews (from all participants) suggested many young people did not understand such terms. And so, I turned to Adolfsson and Madsen's (2019) study on young people in rural Malawi, which investigated local people's conceptions of the gendered development discourse. They noted that such terms were widely used in NGO interventions, and these terms could act as triggers for further discussion. As I found in the first interviews that the young people all had some level of prior engagement with gender discourse (through debate clubs, and online spaces), I ensured to draw out their respective understanding of these concepts. Once I came to know the background and knowledge of the young Bangladeshi participants, I learned these were terms they had much familiarity with and were keen to talk about. This led to some interesting viewpoints from the participants.

There were various components in the second round of interviews, each with its own aims:

1. Gender and society world mapping exercise
2. Mind-mapping exercise
3. Vignettes
4. Likert scales

Traditional, follow-up questions also came with these exercises. The interview guide can be found in Annex 4.

The **gender and society world mapping exercise** was based on an activity described in the participatory facilitation resource from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (1998) ("Games and Exercises: A manual for facilitators and trainers involved in participatory group events"). I conducted an exercise to map how gender roles and expectations exist across the participant's social world. This activity was useful to trigger participants' reflections on gender in their lives and broader society in a focused manner that is more engaging and visual than questions. This involved a simple image of a tree, which was marked as 'Leaves' (regarding the impacts on people), 'Trunk' (areas of society in which gender roles may exist), and 'Roots' (expectations and roles themselves). This activity was to trigger discussion and the participants' thinking on gender in their lives and society. This problem tree is used because I wanted to generate data on gender rules, attitudes, and expectations in kinship roles and in their community, and any structural, institutional, and social barriers they may face based on their gender. In Figure 2, shown below, I wrote the

Leaves/Trunk/Roots captions based on the UNICEF resource and sourced the image by searching 'tree with roots diagram' on Creative Commons.

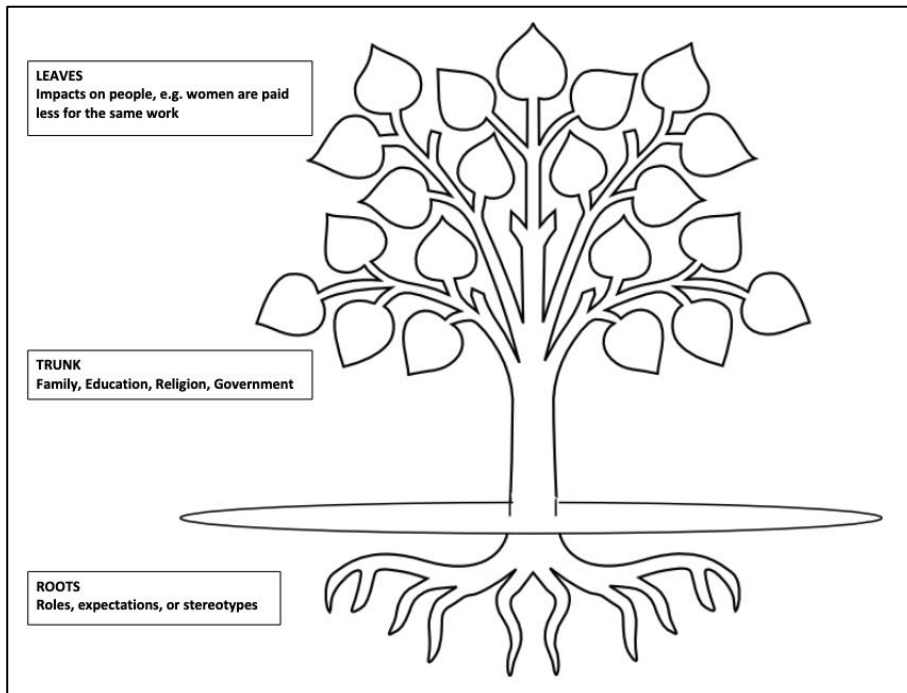


Figure 2: Research activities with young people – gender and social world mapping exercise, unfilled

An example of a participant’s response to the exercise is below:

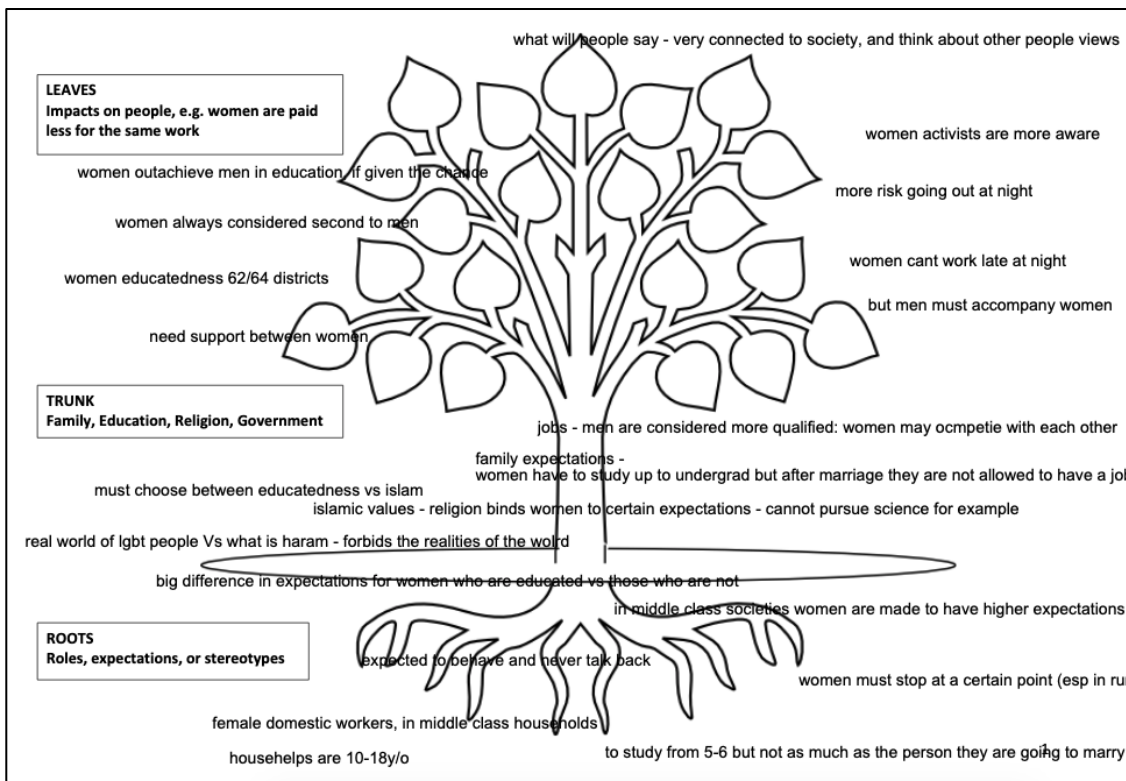


Figure 3: Example of a participant's responses to the gender and social world mapping exercise

Following this exercise, I questioned along the lines of: “What kind of conversations do you hear about ‘gender equality and women’s empowerment’ on the news or in your school/college? Do you think this is relevant to your life? “

Secondly, I conducted a **mind-mapping** exercise to collect data on how the participants define and reflect upon the following keywords:

- Gender
- Change in a person
- Change between people
- Equality
- An empowered person
- A citizen
- Agent of change / changemaker

My inspiration for this activity came from my own experience as a youth advocate with Plan International UK. Other youth advocates and I would act as a source of information for the organisation, and we would be asked about our opinions on gender stereotypes and inequalities. An instance of this was an activity in which we would draw around a person who is lying down on a large sheet of paper and then writing our own thoughts and experiences within the outline of the body under the theme of ‘boy’ and ‘girl’. This activity serves again as a visual and focused way for young people to reflect on very specific terms and how these are applied to a person or group of people.

I chose these words myself as they would give specific insight into: how they define/recognise gender inequality?; Who has responsibility to incite change and in what areas?; What is ‘GEWE’ to them and where have they heard this from?; and unpacking ‘youth as agents of change’. And then I could put all of these reflections together to make word clouds of their collective definitions, to demonstrate the most popular words/phrases used in reference to a key term and the relative frequency with which the same words/phrases are used across participants (visualised in size).

Practically, I had a Microsoft Word document where each page had the respective keyword and an outline of a single or multiple human body, sourced from Creative Commons. I screenshared this document for the participants to see, and then they would dictate what came to mind when they think of the keyword. I would then type up their inputs as they were speaking which they could see, and I later listened to the audio recordings to add participants' inputs I had missed.

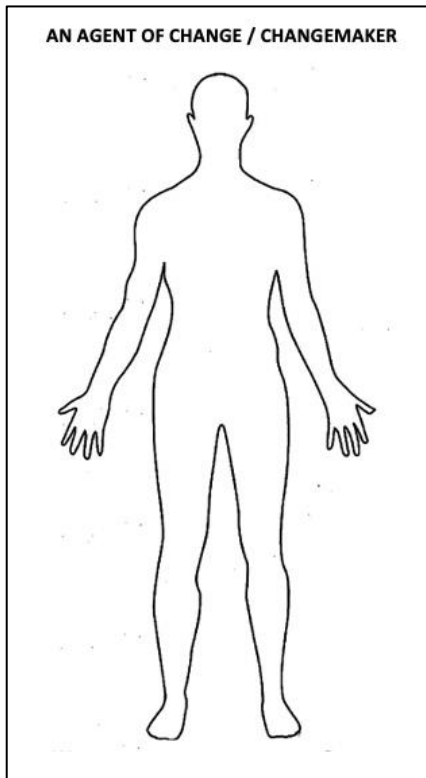


Figure 4: Research activities with young people – mind-mapping 'an agent of change/changemaker', unfilled

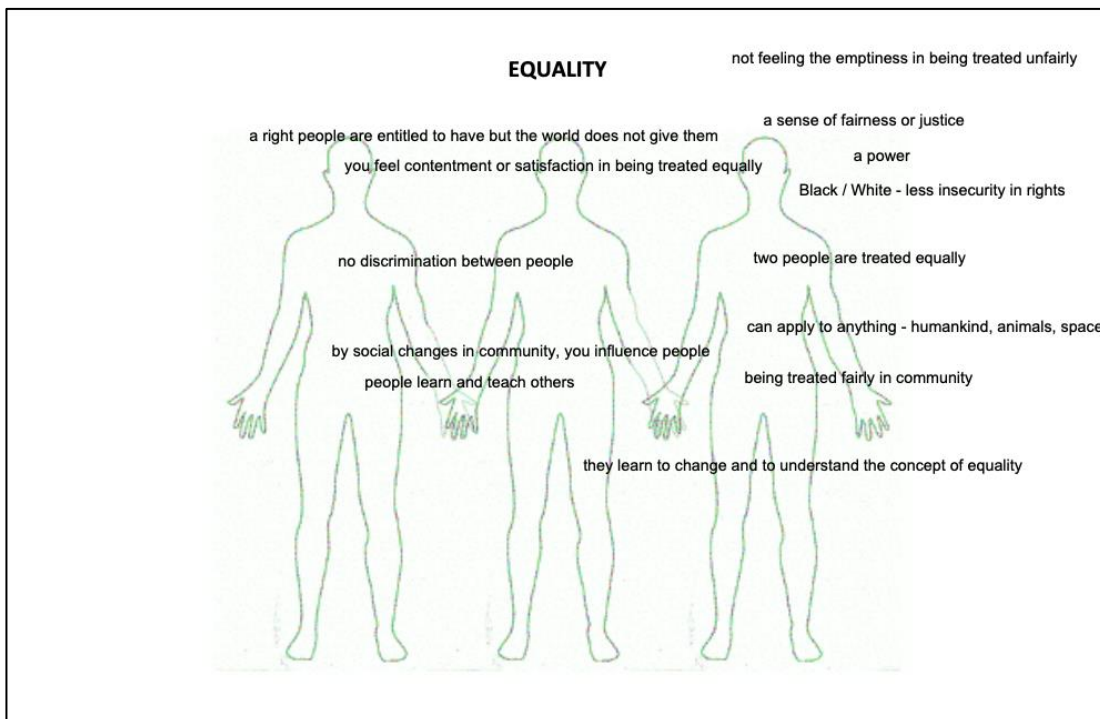


Figure 5: Research activities with young people – participant responses to mind-mapping 'Equality'

I then facilitated conversations using vignettes concerning ideas and debates on perceptions and opportunities for inciting 'gender norm change' in their lives, communities, and public service delivery. Vignettes served to collect data on how the participants reflected on hypothetical short scenarios. Using four vignette scenarios, this activity sought to configure whether participants identify spaces or opportunities for fictional young people to negotiate gender norms and, if not, why? Vignettes concerned situations of young people that are faced with gendered expectations or values and the participants were asked how they would respond. I wrote the vignettes myself, as I wanted reflections on very specific themes that I could not capture in traditional questioning. Themes included:

- 1) Motivations to engage in social change
- 2) How they would navigate parental pushback against youth advocacy
- 3) How to support peers that are facing bullying for being non-gender conforming
- 4) How they would navigate parents putting too much emphasis on careers, rather than pursuing social change as it is an end in itself

I used the screenshare function to show them a document with all of the vignettes, which they could read on their own. After they reflected on each vignette, I asked about their own experiences in challenging gender roles and expectations. All vignettes are found in Annex 4, as part of the Individual Interview Guide Round 2.

Finally, I asked participants to express the degree to which they agree or disagree (across a 5-point scale) in response to Likert scale statements (that I read aloud) and then justify. Statements included but were not limited to: 'This country would benefit from a global agenda towards gender equality'; and 'What the community thinks of me and my family impacts on how outspoken I am'. I followed this style of inquiry with questions such as 'name 3 things you hope the next generation to do differently, please refer to gender if you can'. This portion of the interview sought to answer to what extent young people believe that change is possible, in what areas of life they feel they face inequalities, and their reflections on the norms espoused by the SDGs. All 7 young people participated in the Individual Interview Round 2.

Research activity 3: Image prompts

Following the interviews, in their own time, I asked the participants to photograph, draw, or find a picture on the internet in the public domain of the following:

1. Something you want to change

2. An aspiration
3. Somewhere you think you can change how things are
4. A way your opinion has changed
5. Someone you look up to in the public eye
6. A place/space you can be yourself

These statements stemmed from questions which I could not easily ask in the interviews but were key to the research aims. I also asked that, for each image, they write a sentence saying why they relate this picture to the prompt. I said they could be flexible in how this task was completed, e.g. I suggested they compile all of the images on a Microsoft Word document with the sentence and email this to me. Or they could directly email me the pictures with captions. The participants own the images they have photographed or drawn. Images of people in the public eye could be collected via the online public domain, which I directed participants to. The participants were reminded that they were not to take photographs of other people and to ensure no identifying details are in the photo.

With this method, I could have a conversation around 'gender norms', 'youth empowerment' and 'agency' without using the language. Combining creative methods, wherein the participants produced original art or representations of ideas, with the pursuit of introspection over 'gender' and 'agency' encouraged the participant to engage in self-reflection and sense-making over these normative concepts (Gatenby and Humphries, 2000). Creative activities can capture the complexity of young people's lived experiences of navigating or challenging 'gender norms' – a concept they may not be aware of – through stimulating and self-reflective exercises. van der Vaart et al. (2018) argue such activities in research provide an opportunity to activate and connect the logical, cognitive aspects of the brain with the emotional, creative side of the brain.

This exercise picks up on the aim to collect data on the covert opportunities/challenges for youth to incite change in their everyday relationships and spaces, including in public service delivery. It is intended that this could make up for the inability to conduct in-person observations. 2 participants completed this activity. An example of a participant's contribution to this activity can be found in Annex 5.

Research activity 4: Diaries

Much like the image prompts exercise, diaries draw out data on young people's routines which may highlight any unsaid opportunities/challenges for youth to incite change in their everyday relationships and spaces, not brought up in the Interviews.

I asked the young people to do the diaries every day for a two-week period, which followed the interviews. The participants were given the option to write the diaries either manually and can send a picture of the entries to me after two weeks or digitally (using Google Forms). All 4 participants who completed this task chose the latter option. The participants were given the prompt of 'Provide 2-3 highlights of the day and how they make you feel' and asked to share any interesting social media pages or posts that stood out to them¹¹. The brevity of the activity suited the participants, who each had their own busy extra-curricular schedules. 1 participant also suggested that she was only interested in completing the activity as it did not require much time or commitment.

An example of a participant's contribution to this activity can be found in Annex 6.

1.5.4.4 Analytical strategy

Materials for analysis in this research phase comprise transcription of the audio recordings; Likert scale results; my observations; the digital materials I had co-produced with the participants from the interviews (e.g. the mind-mapping exercise); diary accounts; and the image prompts.

I conducted a thematic analysis of these materials in conjunction with one another, using NVivo software. To see similarities and differences across the participants' definitions of terms, I collated how key terms from the mind-mapping exercise were defined across the different study activities. Beyond these key terms, I coded the relevant data into broad, conceptual categories that were unanticipated and recurrent across the data, such as 'Social Media' or 'Parents'. I was thereby able to include all data as opposed to only anticipated occurring keywords and phrases.

With this strategy, I could identify "overarching patterns of experience by which those concepts and processes are manifested" (Given, 2008, p.868). Participants were mostly from the same school and had shared experiences of everyday life, so there was little variation in the level of understanding of the themes. Where there are notable cases in the data collection, such as a participant sharing an

¹¹ This element of the diaries came about as social media was a recurrent theme in each participants' interviews.

experience that other participants have not, the research can raise this and relate it to a similar theme. The data was coded with an acknowledgement of the gender variation between participants.

1.5.5 Bringing together the data collection

Each stage of the data collection can be justified as addressing one or more RQs of this thesis, demonstrating the validity of the research findings in answering the investigative task of the thesis. In each research phase, data was collected until the appropriate point of data saturation in the collection phase (Saunders et al., 2018). The coding phase for each stage of data collection regularly referred back to the raw data, so that the findings were adequately contextualised. As the sole researcher that conducted and analysed each stage of data collection, I could ensure consistency throughout the data processing (Saldana, 2016). In particular, the systematic nature of the narrative analysis can be noted as reliable and consistent in its sampling and analytical strategy.

The empirical chapters provide multi-level and contrasting analyses of international and local ideas of youth agency, to expose their alignments and misalignments. The findings of these four research phases are presented in tandem and ordered in chapters that each address a respective RQ: attributes of youth; gender equality norms; and theories of youth empowerment to enact change. Each empirical chapter will first synthesise findings from the narrative analysis and the interviews with youth-oriented NGO staff, to comprise the 'youth as agents of change' model (explained below in section 1.11.1 ('The 'youth as agents of change' model')). A critical assessment of GAGE's research and/or original datasets will follow. Then each empirical chapter will present the analysis of the research findings with youth and, where relevant, the findings from the analysis of GAGE datasets. These findings will firstly include the participants' views, in accordance with the chapter's theme, and then an exploration of how their agentic practice supports said theme. Finally, each RQ will be directly answered in exploring how the international and local ideas of youth agency may overlap or contradict one another and why this stems from the politics of the SDG era and the contextually-specific nature of local actors' youth agency.

1.6 Limitations of the Research Process

Beginning the PhD in September 2019, I had originally planned to begin in-person fieldwork in the summer of 2020 in Bangladesh and then the UK to follow. Preparation for fieldwork had begun in January 2020, in the form of email contacting local researchers in Bangladesh as part of the research

recruitment process. With the Covid-19 Pandemic beginning in March of the same year, these in-person research plans were delayed and then altered to be conducted through digital means only.

From the onset of the pandemic, it took months to await confirmation that international travel could not ever be possible for my PhD research. I took this time to rework the foundations of the PhD study to suit online research methods. I had no choice but to follow an emergent style of research design (Patton, 2014). I maintained an openness to adapt my line of inquiry as the situation was continuously changing so that I would not be trapped in any more potentially unfeasible research designs. I was able to recruit youth-oriented NGO employees for online interviews but the use of email to contact organisations to recruit young people came with significant delays. I had been contacting Bangladeshi charities that do not regularly use internet communications and I could not benefit from getting to know them in person to initiate familiarity.

I gave the period of January and February 2021 to recruit Bangladeshi participants online. In reality, it took until April 2021 to recruit participants, who were only Bangladeshi as opposed to also recruiting British participants. After trying for a period of over 9 months to recruit young people in the UK to participate in my study, I had no choice but to forego this aspect of the study. And so, I was unable to carry out an in-depth analysis of local youths' ideas of agency in pursuit of gender equality norms to complement the UK NGO interview findings. Nevertheless, I was able to provide adequate space for the analysis of the Bangladeshi youth and to closely compare the UK NGO with Bangladeshi NGOs. This also meant losing the original research aims for the thesis, which was to explore the similarities and differences of young people's agency and visions of 'GEWE' across the 'global north' and 'global south'. Other research aims lost over the course of the PhD include capturing differences across the youth life stage (i.e. older youth vs younger youth) and comparing young people who act as advocates for NGOs against young people with no interest in gender equality norms or social action. This has been for the best. Despite the interesting insights such results could have given, I have ultimately been able to refine the claims of the thesis.

The Covid-19 Pandemic caused much of the lost opportunity in the collaborative nature of the PhD. I was unable to travel to Bangladesh to work alongside GAGE's in-country Bangladeshi stakeholders/partners and network with GAGE's partners or key informants to access potential other participants in my research. I could not engage with GAGE's primary research as it was occurring, where I could have drawn more directly from their research methodologies or aims, instead making do with the raw data at the end of the data collection process. Though I was able to still maintain this

aspect of the partner through online means, emailing proved to not be an effective or time-efficient means of making connections.

I should note the concerns I had as an anonymous stranger approaching schools and youth organisations online, which may have worked against my favour, though I intended to be as transparent as possible. This outcome in the ease I had in recruiting Bangladeshi young people online more than British young people is cause for consideration. It has led me to wonder, with little evidence, the power dynamics present that led to an online stranger being able to recruit through a school (based on the GAGE in-country researcher) in Bangladesh, because I was British. This is purely speculative and so I can only reflect on this to a limited extent.

The reality of recruiting online has meant I can cast a wide net. Yet, I have still faced a low response rate – most likely due to potential adult gatekeeper's (e.g. employees from schools or youth-centric NGOs) overcapacity in the trying times of the Pandemic. The few recruited participants have come from either affluent backgrounds (attending English Medium Schools) or are university-educated and enrolled in youth advocacy campaigns. This elite capture is the result of requiring participants with internet access and accessing organisations which work with young people with English language skills. Their insights did not have much relevance to most young people in Bangladesh, with particular respect to the most marginalised young people in rural areas. However, this thesis was never going to speak for *all* young people, let alone all Bangladeshi young people. As well, this allowed me to provide GAGE with evidence on a demographic they had not yet studied.

The primary data collection phases were conducted via online/digital means and occurred remotely. I scrapped my original plans of in-person observations, in-person individual interviews, and in-person creative focus groups, to be conducted in Leeds and Dhaka. I was located in Leeds, UK. Participants would be in their respective homes and locations (inclusive of all interviewed participants across the study, this was London, UK and Dhaka, Bangladesh) and use their personal devices such as phones and cameras to participate. Online methods come with specific advantages and disadvantages. Making contact through emails, I was unable to have the time in person to meet with potential participants and establish rapport before recruitment. This process removes being able to contact potential participants with little to no digital access, leading to elite capture. The restrictions of online methods entail using a certain level of tenacity to ensure research activities are engaging for the participants and have the same amount of creativity that the original in-person focus group would have had, e.g. making use of screensharing. This leads to new ways of thinking about how researchers may expand

upon the conventions of qualitative research, considerations that are noted in the section 1.7.1 (Reflections on 'valid fieldwork'). From a practical perspective, online meetings provide flexibility in the time availability of participants.

Though this thesis speaks to the international and local domains, organisations operating nationally are also analysed in this thesis. For the sake of brevity, these organisations are rolled into the international domain. This possibly loses a layer of nuance in this thesis, by foregoing an analysis of the particular differences between international and national level organisations. I justify this merging of national into the international because: 1) together, they represent development institutions and formal organisations (that are different to the kind of stakeholder that Bangladeshi youth represent); 2) the national organisations show no pattern of difference to the international organisations on 'youth as agents of change' rhetoric; and 3) for sake of refinement in this thesis' scope.

To make up for the limitations in data collection are the varied amount of primary and secondary data sources to enrich the thesis: 1) original analyses of GAGE raw datasets and the questionnaire that collected this data, 2017/18 GAGE Baseline Survey for Adult Female Respondents (Baird et al., 2019) and affiliated questionnaires, Young Lives (2006; 2009; 2014a; 2014b; 2017a; 2017b) and the Baseline Global Early Adolescence Survey (2019); 2) narrative analysis across a variety of development actors' policy/programmatic documents, in the post-2015 era; 3) interviews with youth-oriented NGO staff; and 4) research activities with young people. Together, these varied data sources provide a multi-level and contrasting analysis of international and local ideas of youth agency, which is a rigorous evidence base for the claims of this thesis. By triangulating different sources of data, I have been able to capture different sides of the research issue and assured the validation of the findings (Denscombe, 2010), despite the limitations brought by the Pandemic.

1.7 Autobiographical reflections

In this section I will pre-emptively be sharing my reflections on themes of 1) 'valid fieldwork', 2) as a diasporic researcher, and 3) as a former youth advocate. This is a vital intellectual exercise to unpack my own motivations, conditions, and framing of the research. And in doing so, I can embed my own emotionality, experiences and subjectivity within the research sites and data collection (Kisfalvi, 2006). Such an account is compiled through an iterative process; it is the product of learnings, thoughts and experiences from before, during, and after the research activities and analysis. It is non-linear, 'messy', and organic. The themes discussed below are not an exhaustive representation of my reflexivity but encapsulate my primary considerations.

Reflexivity in development research is a self-examination of not only the researcher's belief systems and intersectional privileges but an awareness of the power dynamics the researcher is in (e.g. the power structures that have shaped their knowledge assumptions) (Le Bourdon, 2022). Reflexive processes involve "noticing and thinking through silences in epistemology, boundaries, and power dynamics" (Ackerly and True, 2008, p.695). This can allow the researcher to better relate to the research participants and understand how to navigate the cultures of ethics in the research context.

Positionalities are tied to the identity, and temporal and spatial contexts, of the research parties, a recognition that comes about through engaging in self-reflexivity. It is from this point that I note my somewhat complicated relationship to the research topic: where I hold footing (to differing extents) to gender norms in both British and Bangladeshi cultural contexts; as a racialised 'other' and woman in the UK; as a young person in general; and as a young person *with a background* in youth-led advocacy and mobilisation of youth action on the SDGs. Owing to these factors, I hold multiple positionalities that ground me in the lived realities of navigating certain gender norms and knowledge processes of the SDGs.

As I approached the reflexive process, I began to question: how do we overcome the paralysis of positionality and privilege and introspection to address concerns of power in research (Narayanaswamy and Schöneberg, 2020)? Throughout this PhD journey, I have considered whether an acknowledgement of the researcher's personal differences to that of the research community becomes the easy way out for many researchers to supposedly address power imbalances.

Western academics may use reflexivity by way of stating their privilege and advantages to perform neo-colonialism but carry on with their research as usual, i.e. controlling the methodology, ethics review, data collection, analysis or dissemination (Spivak 1996; cited in Kapoor, 2004). Many reflexive researchers may be reinforcing dominant modes of knowledge without actively amplifying alternative producers of knowledge, such as supporting funding for research by local investigators (Crawford et al., 2017). This kind of reflexivity "puts the onus for change and engagement exclusively on the Third World subaltern (or on the native informant as its representative)" (Kapoor, 2004, p.631). In researching reflexivity in international development itself, it is difficult to separate reflexivity from a form of self-indulgence when I was consistently coming across the white researchers' guilt. There is a danger of a researcher being self-indulgent in their own privilege and giving too much focus to their

'self' concerning the 'otherness' of the research context. These were elements that I feared replicating as I approached the reflexive process.

As well as keeping to normative ethical commitments, I believe these reflections are useful considerations for applying this thesis' themes that recognise the white, liberal feminisms of international development (explored in Chapter Two) to the research process itself.

1.7.1 Reflections on 'valid fieldwork'

The Covid-19 Pandemic highlighted my preconceptions and anxieties about what can be considered 'valid fieldwork', which is a traditionalist fallacy. Development research often involves conducting ethnographies and longitudinal fieldwork, based on maintaining long-term research relationships (Newton et al., 2012). I worried about the rigour of fieldwork conducted from the comfort of my home which would fail to show my dedication to a project in the way that packing up my life for months at a time would do. My ideas of traditional rigour pertained to the neo-colonialist 'outsider/insider' legacy of international development research. It suggests that spending an arbitrary amount of time in any field site will grant the 'outsider' researcher knowledge of local cultural norms and full access to the community.

The research would certainly be a different creature if I were able to conduct more traditional in-person fieldwork: instead of the in-person scoping period, I was at home and able to carry out teaching responsibilities; Instead of flying out to Bangladesh to gain familiarity with the location (likely Dhaka), I wrote an (eventually unpublished) journal article; instead of in-person recruitment through snowballing, I was on my laptop chasing up recruitment emails in between drafting chapters for the thesis. I balanced various tasks during the online interviews that I would have not been able to do during the in-personal fieldwork, but this was in the interest of generally keeping to the funding deadline. To not be bound by physical location has thereby been somewhat freeing. I recruited a small-scale sample size from my home without the opportunity cost of the money and time to travel to Bangladesh where I would also recruit a few participants. I am proud that my project managed to subvert the traditional vision of international development research, whilst producing a robust evidence base.

I have had to adapt quickly and dynamically to transferring pre-planned research activities to the online space. Where I originally planned to do observation, I replaced it with images and diaries

activities. I think this was an improvement towards participant co-production and deconstructed traditional anthropological methods that perpetuate otherness and superiority. Based on my conversations with the participants, I believe the participants would have felt patronised by arts-and-crafts or roleplaying style activities which are often involved in in-person participatory focus groups. I believe the online activities were more appropriate for their cognitive ability and articulation of concepts that they were already comfortable talking about. They were already used to talking about feminism and activism in online spaces, so it was more natural for them to speak to me about these themes through these means. Ultimately, not much was lost going online, barring a stage of in-person introduction and familiarity. The participants' schooling, origins of their social values, and social time was spent online (due to the pandemic and their class privilege) – and so the emphasis on online methods was advantageous in catering to these aspects.

The free time enabled by online recruitment and research, as well as life in the official Covid-19 lockdowns, gave me much time to think and practice reflexivity about the research. In the interest of maintaining an appropriate work/life balance for the sake of my mental health, online methods are preferable to an immersive in-person ethnographic field study.

To do a PhD is to practice a combination of the standards of institutional research ethics, the boundaries imposed by funding bodies and time-bound contracts, and to give due diligence to one's own research aims (Millora et al., 2020). By centring care and emotionality in this research, I am forthright in prioritising work/life balance, preventing burnout, and my right to funding in the time of Covid. Yet, my want to adopt such themes in this research was in contention with institutional requirements, i.e. the 3-year funded timeline. At the very least, I could bring in a focus that academic research is a continuous process of navigating how we can use our research and the ways we research. I would hope to challenge the institutional practices that reduce ethics to a checklist in the PhD process, which do not capture the real-life decisions and time required for relationship-building (Millora et al., 2020).

The research is rigorous in how it relates to GAGE. The methodological processes of the research, the research aims, and my original findings are all consequences of the collaborative nature of this PhD with ODI's GAGE. I was bound to maintain a theoretical or practical likeness to GAGE, as to fulfil its role as a complementing critical analysis. This was not a limitation, but useful in steering the thesis to be thematically appropriate throughout my PhD journey. By embedding the thesis in a longitudinal research programme that is supporting efforts to track progress on adolescent lives and wellbeing

around the world, I have been able to independently analyse large existing quantitative datasets, conduct my own original analysis of GAGE datasets, and make use of in-country key informants. In return, I would hope this thesis has provided GAGE with a more nuanced picture of young Bangladeshi lives through the inclusion of affluent urban youth as participants; a demographic that had not yet been extensively researched by GAGE. Moreover, this thesis offers GAGE a mirror through which it can see its methodologies, thematic gaps, and limited ideological critical stance in relation to neoliberal development policy, programming, and funding bodies – from an academic point of view.

1.7.2 Reflections as a diasporic researcher

My racial and cultural identity has informed much of how this research has been framed: from the literature review to the line of questioning in the research activities to the lens I use to analyse the data. As an individual that is racialised as British Bengali, it may be assumed my familiarity with Bengali culture and language is akin to my 'comfort' in navigating British cultural norms. This would be mistaken, as I feel like an outsider to the Bangladeshi context and lived experience. As a Bangladeshi diaspora, my gendered experience is shaped by being a person of colour in a white colonial country, while my young Bangladeshi participants have no understanding of being a racialised 'other' in their own country.

I hold somewhat of a disconnect with Bangladesh and so hold a sense of uncertainty around how I can speak to gender norms and ideas of gender norm change in a way that doesn't influence participants. Before the interviews, I was concerned that I lacked a certain cultural knowledge of being able to direct a conversation or hint at something – which I could do in the UK context. Without the ability to coherently speak Bengali, I am shut out as an 'insider', if it weren't for the participants' fluency in English. Language is the key to understanding so much in cultural norms.

To be a diasporic researcher doesn't mean I am not complicit in the production of knowledge stemming from 'global north' academic sector. It may be impossible to conduct research from institutions built on colonial logic without reinscribing any level of coloniality itself. Languages are certainly institutions of power (Grondin, 2014). By speaking only English, this research remains in the domain of the Anglosphere. By mostly speaking with middle-class Bangladeshis, this research was subject to elite capture and has little scope to critically interrogate class and wealth inequality in Bangladesh. A key informant in Bangladesh I spoke with said that, by interviewing young people in

English Medium Schools, I was speaking with a group that only represents about a third of Bangladeshi youth (the rest being attendees of Bangla Medium Schools).

This does not only come through with participants who speak English in the interviews, but because of my English-centric recruitment methods: I reached out to Bangladeshi organisations that are findable via UK Google, and which had mostly English websites. This method is one that inadvertently distances me from those unable to speak English or with less confident English-speaking skills. Moreover, speaking English with English-speaking Bengalis can trigger participants to feel the need to upspeak, or perform with a sense of professionalism rather than personability (Court and Abbas, 2013). This could perhaps relate to the young people who attend English Medium Schools, though they were all able to give a sense of informality in their speech. It should be said that given much of the social media posts they consume are written in English, their relaying of discourses around feminism and political topics of LGBTQ+¹² rights and anti-racism already exists in the domain of English. So, their articulation of gender norms and aspirations around gender norms were true to how they wished to express themselves.

Reflexivity is not necessarily to highlight researcher-participant differences; it can be practised as a way of identifying commonalities with the research participants. Indeed, I found many similarities with the participants, specifically relating to kinship relationships. I face certain gendered and cultural norms that are specifically Bengali, such as around successes or marriage expectations. These inform my experience of gender in my life, and I found comparisons with participants. When this subject was brought up by the female participants, we were able to speak at length about these shared personal expectations from our parents. I think this was an advantage to the generative quality of the research activities.

The participants' involvement with extracurricular feminist action fits into common Bengali parental ideas of success and competitiveness toward high-status jobs. Inferring from both my personal experience and the participants' responses, some girls face higher expectations from parents of what is considered 'success'. And that, from a liberal feminist point of view, this could be seen as a change in gender norms: women are pushed to enter patriarchal public domains and be trailblazers. This is the liberal politics of representation (which has no emphasis on interrogating systemic causes of inequality). Yet, girls are urged to work harder than boys to achieve what is considered 'success'.

¹² Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others

1.7.3 Reflections on youth advocacy

I too could have once fit the ideal characteristics for a participant in this study, as a young person with experience as a youth 'advocate' for youth-centric NGOs like Restless Development and Plan International UK. These kinds of programmes give young people training and education on the 'formative' role of young people in development to 'empower' participants to lead their own campaigns under the NGO's support, known as 'youth-led change'. 'Youth-led change' becomes a normative process in which young people – often in invited spaces – give their feedback on adult-led organisational policy and programming or partake in peer-to-peer campaigning. I, too, had a role in this process. Following my training as a 'Restless Development SDGs Accountability Advocate', we – as youth advocates – created and planned training workshops on the SDGs for other young people to train them on how to monitor governmental progress. The narrative of the SDGs, and the broader 'GEWE' neoliberal development agenda, is filtered down by many development agencies, and internalised by these young people (including myself) who are tasked to disseminate these ideas to their peers and communities.

I advocated on behalf of people that looked like me but faced very different problems to me e.g. on FGM and child marriage and secondary education enrolment. What specialism was I giving besides being a young person that was regurgitating (but very much believing in) what I was taught as a youth advocate? Wilson's (2019) writing on diasporic girls in development likens the kinds of programming I participated in with a contemporary imperialist project. Diasporic girls in development, like myself, are constructed as 'agents of development' embodying British post-feminist gender values that they carry over to the countries of their heritage, in an attempt to alleviate gender oppression and violence (ibid). Perhaps, as an 'agent of development', I was imbued with similar characteristics of spectacularisation and saviourism embedded in the SDGs' politics (explored in Chapter Two). Here I was reinscribing 'global north-south' inequality whilst being a consistently othered subject in Britain, as to unwittingly prove myself as aligned with normative values around 'Britishness' (Wilson, 2019). I succumbed to the colonial and patriarchal mentality that oppressed people are taught by society, and then internalise, as to perpetuate hegemonic systems of power.

It is strange to problematise these structures or spaces as based on liberalised and racialised logic when the youth-led organisations I am talking to sound very much youth-created. It is here that I note many young people *truly* believe in, and relate to, such a narrative. This is something I took into consideration in the primary data collection: to ensure the questions and activities are not directed as

positive or negative toward the SDGs and ideas around social change. There are certainly methodological implications of these experiences, as they have led my investigation from the start. I held questions over the validity of being able to do this as an ‘objective researcher’, based on my positionality and experience. It would be a fallacy to attempt to mitigate my pre-existing knowledge, and so I chose to embrace this standpoint. Firstly, I had a familiarity with youth-advocacy style programming, which was highly useful in my youth-centric NGO interviews. Secondly, I think I have been able to have a somewhat sympathetic understanding of the young participants, who espoused white, liberal feminist values around ‘progressiveness’ and globalised mindsets. I would give them space to air views and experiences that may both cater to or negate the norms of the SDGs.

It was during this PhD journey that I realised I have little familiarity with how young people – that lack a background in SDG advocacy or mobilising around gender norm change – conceive of social change regarding gender or navigating gender norms. And so, I wanted to ensure my research considered how to deploy normative concepts of ‘adolescent agency’, ‘gender norm change’, ‘youth empowerment’ to individuals that are unfamiliar with the concepts, though this was unnecessary in the primary research stages.

1.7.4 The reflexive process as an initiating spark

With this, I turn to argue for the credibility of this research, given that ‘objectivity’ is so normatively valorised in academic research. I argue that the findings of the thesis could likely only be the outcome of multiple, very contextually specific characteristics, to name but a few: a 3-year funded PhD; a partnership with GAGE; an unanticipated global pandemic; and a young female, British Bengali researcher with an extensive background participating in the very neoliberal youth and gender equality advocacy programmes that this thesis problematises. What can be said, however, is that this thesis is a realistic account of such characteristics interplaying. And so, I recognise this research is imbued with my partiality and by the particular historical, economic, and cultural configurations within which I live (Darder, 2015).

Much like knowledge production is “never pure but is situated in the complex and sometimes contradictory social locations of producers and audiences” (Mullings, 1999, p.337), identity too, cannot be escaped but is a useful analytical lens in international development research. Regarding the question that framed my autobiographical reflections – how do we overcome the paralysis of positionality and privilege and introspection to address concerns of power? (Narayanaswamy and

Schöneberg, 2020) – perhaps, it is the process of recognising the uncomfortable feelings during the research process which are integral to addressing concerns of power imbalances.

The outlined concerns are valid and true to how I felt as I researched and wrote the thesis. Yet, as I seek to ‘learn and un-learn’ in my personal and professional life, I recognise it is likely that I will look back on these reflections as superficial in their application of reflexivity and assessing the insider/outsider dichotomy (Le Bourdon, 2022). The reflexive process is not finite; I must continuously reflect on my thinking and practice of my PhD and act on what I have learnt from this later self-examination, through "writing and conversation" (ibid, p.3). Reflexivity and positionality reflect the messiness of our temporally-specific motivations and identities and how we are all multiple things at once. It is as much about acknowledging one's own complicity and practising humility. I hope these reflections contextualise how I framed this research, and how this research framed me and my learning about myself. It is an asset that my unique positionalities have greatly influenced not only my personal values but the knowledge I have constructed in this research, so that it may be a robust and insightful piece of work.

1.8 Ethics and Integrity

I recognise consent as a continuous process, which is constantly negotiated and explained between the researchers and the participants (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Participants were informed that they have the right to withdraw at any time during the research phases. I ensured that participants exhibited a level of enthusiasm throughout each activity so that they do not feel coerced. Another key aspect of the consent process is to guarantee that the participants fully understand the types of themes that may arise in the interviews, so that they may feel prepared and comfortable to discuss their personal experiences of navigating gender norms. In the interviews, I used open-ended questions so that the participants can direct the discussions, thereby covering topics of their choosing. The nature of the diary and image activities meant the participants were able to produce whatever information they felt comfortable sharing.

I use pseudonyms for all participants and avoid using identifying personal details.

Interviews with youth-centric NGOs

Regarding the interviews with youth-centric NGOs, the participants were adults who are tied to NGOs and CSOs. There is a possibility of deductive disclosure in the research due to the specificity of

searchable youth-centric NGOs. I will not name the affiliated organisations – but describe them – as to prevent the deductive disclosure of the participants. I will name the organisations as Actor A, Actor B, etc. This research stage asked for participants to relay the overall demographics and histories of the young people they work with. This could be interpreted as potentially breaking confidentiality. However, interview questions did not ask for any personal details which could lead to jeopardising the anonymity of the individual young people they work with. This study only asked participants to give a broad overview of the kind of young people (regarding their values and backgrounds) who participate in their work towards gender equality.

Research activities with young people

The participants include young people under the age of 18, with the age range falling between 14-19 years old. Owing to the inclusion of minors in the study, full and informed written consent was required of all participants and their caregivers. During the recruiting phase, the aims of the research and the intended purposes of participant data were explained to the participants before the study via written communication.

I made specific provisions for the presence of Bengali translators, though this was not necessary as the participants were all fluent English speakers. I made exceptions and accommodated the research for participants who may not have access to such technologies throughout the study duration but would still like to take part, though this was ultimately not necessary with the recruited participants.

1.9 Data management

Data in this research was comprised of 1) my handwritten notes, 2) my electronically written notes, 3) audio recordings, 4) digital photos of the participants' creative outputs in the focus groups, and 5) the participants' photographs/drawings. The last three forms of data collection are all subject to participants' individual permissions, which I asked for in the consent form and again verbally/via email during each research phase.

Data was stored on the University of Leeds One Drive Cloud system. This data was encrypted and not stored locally on my personal device to maintain the security and confidentiality of participants' personal data. Only I will have access to participants' personal information and uncoded data. I will store the datasets for a period of 2 years after the completion of the thesis. All interviews were audio-recorded (as agreed in the consent forms and verbally at the beginning of each research activity), files

which are stored on the One Drive system. I also transcribed the audio files onto a document stored on One Drive. All hard copies of data were photographed or written electronically and stored on the One Drive system. The research and data will keep to the intellectual property needs of my collaborating partner organisation, the Overseas Development Institute.

1.10 Terminology

In this section, I clarify and justify my use of specific terminology or phrasing to discuss key concepts of this research which will be used throughout this thesis.

1.10.1 Unpacking the international and local levels

As noted above, this thesis uses 'international' and 'local' as key domains to differentiate development institutions and formal organisations from Bangladeshi youth; it is used in the Research Questions to specify that it is exploring across the development system. These terms are to be taken with a pinch of salt. These terms serve to demonstrate where norms are believed to originate by participants and white, liberal feminist thought: an oversimplified dichotomy that 'global = progressive norms' and 'local = traditional norms' that justifies the universalising reach of white, liberal feminisms. As will be demonstrated across this work – from the online content the young participants engage with and their views; to the Bangladeshi historical context; and to development actors' norms – this thesis exposes the falsehood of this dichotomy. Norms that are believed to have originated in one domain are in actuality mutually constructed across domains at once. This is due to the interaction between spaces that gives way to alignments and misalignments in norm uptake. This is conceptualised by norm theory in that norms are constantly travelling, in-flux, and being interpreted by actors (discussed in section 2.9.3).

'International' is used in this thesis as a catch-all term to capture the varying levels at which the development industry operates. Where this thesis has researched organisations that operate at the national level (NGO interviews and some documents in the narrative analysis), the use of 'international' captures this dimension too. To use 'international' in this way is, however, key in recognising that, regardless of the level of operation, the development industry is deeply interconnected (through funding priorities, institutional partnerships etc).

In the development context 'local' has historically been used in a patronising and racist manner to homogenise organisational partners and stakeholders in the 'global south'. As well, 'local' may fail to capture how a 'local' actor is connected to the national and international levels. Yet, 'local' is useful in exposing the disjuncture between the data on Bangladeshi youth (including GAGE's survey data) and the formal development industry and national feminist or youth-oriented organisations.

1.10.2 'Youth as agents of change'

The 'youth as agents of change' rhetoric around gender equality drives the investigation of this thesis, particularly regarding the kind of youth that are imagined and what social change should look like. The development actor analysis and youth-centric NGO interviews were situated around such themes, and so it is pertinent that my original visualisation of evidence of how youth are imagined in change is characterised as the 'youth as agents of change' model (discussed in section 1.11.1). Though seemingly a gender-neutral term, this investigation will expose how the 'youth' in question is, in actuality, coded and racialised to mean 'global south' girlhoods in the literature review (Chapter 2) and demonstrate how this plays out in development actor rhetoric in Chapter 3. With the invisibility of boyhoods and the spectacularisation of girlhoods, this thesis argues that the emphasis on girls in 'youth as agents of change' furthers the notion in white, liberal feminisms in which Black and Brown girls of the 'global south' are turned into neoliberal subjects whose citizenship role and future is imagined for them: they are burdened to 'save the world'.

1.10.3 Gender equality norms

It is necessary to clarify how this thesis operationalises terms of 'gender norms', 'gender norm change', and 'gender equality norms'. Firstly, I will unpack the meanings behind 'gender norms' and the subjective ways they may be sought to 'change' or 'shift'. Gender norms "exist not in a vacuum but rather as parts of a broader social system" (Bingenheimer, 2019, p.52) that is maintained by formal and informal institutions by way of unequal power relations at the micro-, meso-, and macro-level (Malhotra et al., 2019). Gender norms are engendered social roles, practices, values, and behaviours that prescribe power, agency and capability of people based on their gender identity. Gender norms thereby shape the social order of the world (Kabeer, 2011) and bring about patriarchal expectations that cause women and gender and sexual minorities' subordination in society. Kabeer (2011) notes gender norms exist throughout the social, political, and economic world and operate at the cognitive, social, and material levels. Based on biological viewpoints of sex and gender, gender norms provide

cultural legitimation for behaviours and practices that deem what is appropriate masculine/feminine traits (Hughes and Desai, 2019), i.e. the normalization of men as strong and therefore having the capacity to be violent (Wight et al., 2006). At the individual level, gender norms are performed (Butler, 1988), and when they are not followed under local customs, this can have negative implications, such as social stigma, risk of violence, and ostracization.

Gender norm change is the process in which specific gender norms are validated or erased (Engberg-Pederson et al., 2019). It is the process of replacing or negotiating existing norms with norms that value gender equity and foster positive attitudes to girls' education, sexual and reproductive health etc¹³ (Pulerwitz et al., 2019). Gender norm change prescribes injunctive norms, which are the idealised change in how people believe others expect them to behave or what behaviours and attitudes ought to be (Deidre et al., 2018). This includes *who* is placed with the responsibility to change these norms, and in *what* areas of society.

In this thesis, I refer to 'gender equality' norms, as the mandate for gender norm change – be it from the SDGs, development actors, or young people's own mandate for gender equality. This is because the normative concepts of 'gender equality' and 'women's empowerment' are not objective but can be contested, a key concept for this thesis.

1.11 Conceptual and analytical framework/lens

The following frameworks will be used to analyse and present the research findings throughout the thesis: 1) the 'youth as agents of change' model and 2) agency, structuration, and norms in dialogue. The synthesis of dialogues and literature within the framework and lens provide this thesis' original contributions to gender and development knowledge. The former demonstrates development actors' assumptions for how young people are embedded in the gender norm change process are based on liberalised/racialised justifications. The latter presents youth agency in pursuing gender equality norms to be heterogeneous and contextually specific. When evidence that is analysed under the framework and lens are presented in tandem, this thesis exposes the disjuncture between international and local actors' norms when juxtaposed against one another. An explanation of the conceptual and analytical framework/lens follows.

¹³ As established, this thesis does not look to establish methods to bring about norm change but to interrogate what norms are valued in the process of gender norm change.

1.11.1 The ‘youth as agents of change’ model

The ‘youth as agents of change’ model is a conceptual framework that presents the findings of the narrative analysis and youth-centric NGO interviews in tandem. The era of the SDGs has mobilised the rhetoric of ‘youth as agents of change’. This rhetoric justifies the engagement of young people in the delivery and monitoring of the SDGs, becoming a prevalent norm across the development industry both within and outside the remit of the SDGs. It is not a question of ‘do youth have agency’ but why do international actors justify youth to pursue this global agenda and what is assumed of youth agency; foundational to addressing the three RQs.

This conceptual framework presents the ways ‘youth as agents of change’ rhetoric is utilised by various development actors, thereby investigating in what ways youth’s contribution to ‘GEWE’ is imagined. Based on the findings of the narrative analysis and the NGO interviews, this chapter presents an original visualisation of the process that encompasses the expectations awarded to youth and how change happens: ‘youth as agents of change’ model (shown in Figure 6).

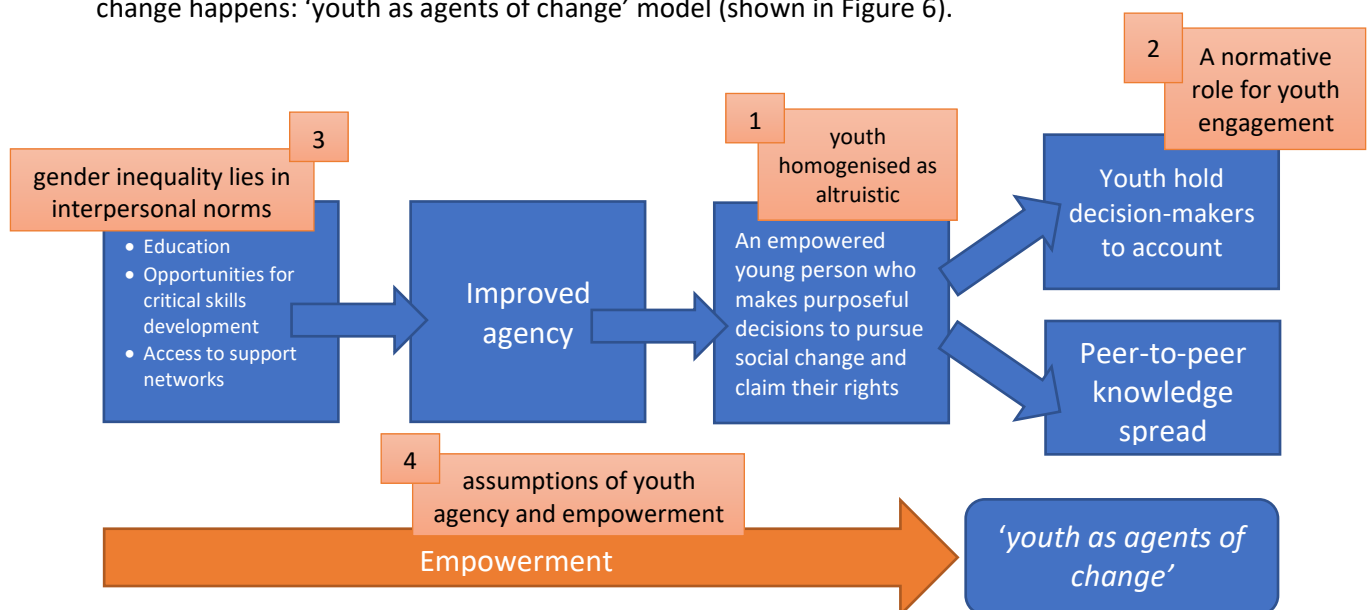


Figure 6: The ‘youth as agents of change’ model (author’s own)

The process involves, firstly, the assumed inputs (education, opportunities for critical skills development, access to support networks) towards the improved agency of young people. Improved agency leads to young people that are ‘empowered’, which means they can make purposeful decisions to pursue social change and ‘claim’ the rights they may be denied. Together, these stages comprise

empowerment, which is a prerequisite to pursuing social change or claiming their rights (e.g. through engaging with decision-makers and/or peer-to-peer knowledge spread).

Exemplified in Figure 6 above, the following areas of this process will be highlighted in this thesis: 1) youth homogenised as altruistic; 2) a normative role for youth engagement with politics; 3) gender inequality lies in interpersonal norms; and 4) assumptions of youth agency and empowerment. The 'youth as agents of change' model is thereby a valuable contribution of this thesis. It uncovers development actor embeddedness in the SDGs' politics and provides evidence – beyond the literature review – around how youth agency in pursuit of gender equality is conceptualised at international levels.

1.11.2 Agency, structuration, and norms in dialogue

Bridging literature on agency, structure, and norms provides an analytical lens for the heterogeneous ways youth may enact their own gender equality visions, under prevailing gender equality norms (i.e. of the SDG era) These bodies of literature are explored and put into dialogue in Chapter Two.

In bridging literature of agency, structuration and contestation of norms, this thesis proposes an analytical lens to pinpoint in the empirical data when such themes will interplay in the Bangladeshi youth participants' lives. The findings of this thesis do not represent youth agency for the global youth population, Bangladeshi youth, or even *all* urban affluent youth of Dhaka, but one of the infinite ways in which youth agency may be practised or researched. And so, at the local level, the uptake of 'youth as agents of change' will also vary.

1.12 Thesis Structure

Chapter Two is a review of literature that proposes the ways in which international actor ideas of youth agency misalign with those of youth agency. This chapter firstly explores why and how the politics of the SDGs construct youth agency in particular ways by exploring the positioning of youth in the SDG machinery and broader development rhetoric, including across the UN definitions of youth, SDG formulation, ideology, and SDG implementation. Viewing the SDGs as a set of norms exposes the colonialist and capitalist logic in the SDGs. This chapter then uses feminist theory to analyse what comprises the SDGs' imagination of youth agency, akin to how the development industry imagines racialised womanhood as burdened in the pursuit of change. Synthesising literature on white, liberal

feminisms with illustrative examples from the textual framework of the SDGs, this chapter finds 1) a politics of inclusion and individualism and 2) girlhoods are spectacularised and overburdened with the pursuit of gender equality. GAGE's own response to the SDGs, which includes critique of the limited measures around youth, are included in this review of the SDGs' politics.

What of young people's agency, as enacted and thought about by youth themselves? To explore youth agency *in changing gender norms* by young people themselves, this chapter then bridges literature on agency, structuration, and norms. Together, this literature proposes the heterogeneity, and contextually-specific nature of local ideas of youth agency, which lies in contention with those imagined at the international level. I conduct a review of GAGE's research on youth agency in Bangladesh, which I contextualise within broader scholarly knowledge on 'GEWE' in Bangladesh. Chapter Two is foundational for recognising the multiplicity of how youth agency to pursue gender equality is imagined across international and local actors.

Chapter Three is the first of the three empirical chapters. Chapter Three concerns the theme of how youth people themselves are imagined across international and local levels, answering RQ 1 (Why do attributes of youth align and misalign across international and local levels?). It does so by 1) unpacking assumed attributes of youth in the 'youth as agents of change' model, 2) exploring the kinds of youth who are proposed in GAGE's research based on the original analysis, 3) exploring Bangladeshi youth views and agency on youth roles and capacities, and 4) analysing how these youth views align and misalign with development actor norms. Putting this evidence in dialogue with one another, this chapter argues international actors are embedded in the politics of the SDGs, in which youth are based on racialised justifications for their role in gender norm change.

Then, **Chapter Four** explores the *kinds* of gender equality norms valorised by international and local actors in imagining youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms, answering RQ 2 (Why do gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?). This chapter will 1) explore the implicit assumptions of what constitutes gender inequality and injustice in the 'youth as agents of change' model, 2) assess the way that the GAGE survey tool frames gender equality norms, at the international level, 3) present local ideas of gender equality norms found in the original analysis of GAGE raw data, 4) explore Bangladeshi youths' definitions of – and agentic practice around – 'GEWE', 'gender norms', and thoughts on LGBTQ+ rights and issues, and 5) analyse how these gender equality norms align and misalign with development actor norms. This chapter proposes that international actors hold liberalised ideas of gender equality norms that overburden the individual's role in change.

Youth agency at the local level is heterogenous across the participants, with some of their gender equality norms overlapping with the liberal politics of individualism in the SDG era.

The final empirical chapter is **Chapter Five**. This chapter presents a synthesis of the findings from the research phases that concern theories of youth empowerment to enact change, answering RQ 3 (Why does youth empowerment to pursue gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?). This chapter speaks to 1) the way that processes of empowerment are framed in the 'youth as agents of change' model, 2) the way that GAGE envisions youth roles in change through how it critiques the SDGs as dictated by its funding politics, 3) Bangladeshi youth views on social change and empowerment processes and their development of critical consciousness as agentic practice, and 4) how these youth views align and misalign with development actor norms. This chapter argues there is some disconnect between the international actors and the contextually-specific reality of social change as experienced by young people themselves. This is caused by development architecture's embeddedness in neoliberal politics of cost-efficiency and over-simplified solutions.

Lastly, **Chapter Six** comprises the conclusions of this thesis. I synthesise the responses to RQs across the empirical chapters to explore how youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms is conceptualised at international and local levels, respectively, to then propose why these ideas misalign. This summary includes noting the contributions of the 'youth as agents of change' model and theorising youth agency in pursuing gender equality norms under the proposed analytical lens. As well, this chapter includes an exploration of the ways this thesis has made use of the collaborative relationship with GAGE and what this study's findings offer for GAGE. Then, I propose considerations for how these contributions may be situated within broader research and evidence on youth agency and gender equality norms, including limitations. I propose how the study findings can be carried forward in the future and provide final reflections on the PhD journey.

2 Chapter Two: Literature review of the multiplicity of youth agency in the SDG era

2.1 Introduction

This literature review chapter responds to the RQs in two parts. 'Part 1: Youth in the SDGs' concerns the SDG construction of youth agency, thereby providing some response to the RQs on how youth agency in pursuit of gender equality is conceptualised at international levels. 'Part 2: Youth in the gender norm change process' follows by considering how agency in pursuit of gender norm change can be conceptualised, which is foundational to the thinking in the empirical findings and provides a response to the RQs through the domain of the local levels.

Part 1 wrestles with the question of how to explore the construction of youth agency in the SDGs when 1) youth are largely invisible in the textual framework and 2) there is little literature that directly exposes the likely links between youth in the SDGs and the colonial and capitalist logics of the framework.

This chapter solves this problem by first reviewing the positioning of youth in the SDG machinery and broader development rhetoric, including across the UN definitions of youth, SDG formulation, ideology, and SDG implementation. This section finds an emphasis on 'youth as agents of change', in which the capacity- and knowledge-building of young people is sought to achieve wider development outcomes. This leads to the question of *why* the SDGs homogenise and hypervisibilise youth to serve broader development challenges.

A review of the politics of the SDGs follows, to explore why there is a chasm between the SDGs and serving the heterogeneous needs of the global population. Viewing the SDGs as a set of norms exposes the colonialist and capitalist logic in the SDGs. By locating a literature review of these topics onto 'GEWE', this section reviews how the SDGs 1) set a top-down imposition of norms, which 2) follow a logic of universalised metrics, characterised by standardisation; and these metrics 3) pose the problem of global inequality and injustice as on the individual domain rather than on neoliberal actors.

Such considerations are the first step in uncovering why youth agency is so highly valorised in the SDGs. Then, white, liberal feminisms are posed as a pertinent lens to uncover how the development

industry that once gave much-misplaced resources and burden onto womanhood may now also locate these discourses onto youth. I analyse what comprises the SDGs' imagination of youth agency. Synthesising literature on white, liberal feminisms with illustrative examples from the textual framework of the SDGs, this chapter finds 1) a politics of inclusion and individualism and 2) girlhoods are spectacularised and overburdened with the pursuit of gender equality. GAGE's own response to the SDGs, which includes a critique of the limited measures around youth, is included in this review of the SDGs' politics.

The diagram below visualises how each section feeds into the next in Part 1.

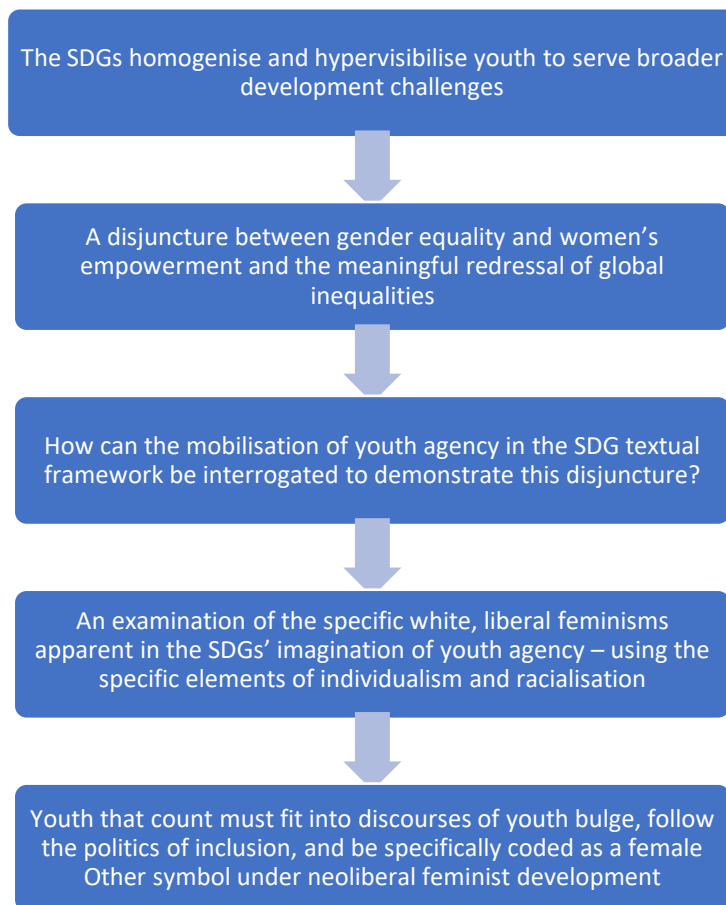


Figure 7: Visualisation of concepts in Part 1

Together, these findings respond to the international aspects of the three RQs, which signify the top-down imposition of youth agency is framed by logic that does not emphasise young people's own needs or realities. This lies in contention with the SDGs' own spouted values of representation and progressiveness.

There is little direct literature on conceptualising young people's agency to pursue gender norm change under the imposed gender equality norms of the SDG era. To address this, 'Part 2: Youth in the gender norm change process' explores literature on agency (within the gender norm change process), structuration, and norms in dialogue to understand the specificities of youth agency in pursuit of their own ideas of gender equality whilst living under existing imposed norms. And so, this analytical lens is useful for the empirical data on youth to unveil youth agentic action in pursuing gender equality norms.

Then, I provide a brief review of literature about the history of women's empowerment and gender equality norms in the Bangladesh context, including a synopsis of published GAGE analyses of their primary research in Bangladesh. This section serves to provide background for the context in which Bangladeshi young people are shifting gender norms. Much of GAGE's research in Bangladesh speaks to themes of aspirations, parental relationships, and community norms as central to young people's agency.

Part 2 thereby provides the conceptual thinking behind the local-level aspects of the three RQs, in exploring the heterogeneity and contextually-specific nature of youth agency, which lies in contention with those imagined by the SDGs. There is value in acknowledging the white, liberal feminisms as a lens to expose the fallacy of imposed norms around youth agency. This chapter is a contribution to debates that problematise the disjuncture between international and local actors' norms, by specifying neoliberal and racialised imposition of youths' role in change.

Part 1: Youth in the SDGs

2.2 Who counts as 'youth'?

Firstly, this literature review explores who counts as 'youth' in the following areas: as a broad definition in development, in the United Nations (UN), and in SDGs specifically. Few studies offer a critical analysis of the role of young people and how 'youth agency' may be instrumentalised in the SDGs; a gap in which this research will be situated. It is the aim of this section to provide a foundation on youth roles in the broad rhetoric of the SDGs, so that it is subsequently possible to understand youth agency as specified in the textual framework of the SDGs in the following sections 2.5 ('Understanding youth agency in the SDGs: Individualised, liberal modes of change...') and 2.6 ('Understanding youth agency in the SDGs: Spectacularised and racialised girlhoods...').

'Youth' is a category that has no universally agreed-upon definition, whereby most age-based definitions vary according to cultural contexts (Nandigiri, 2012). 'Youth' is a norm, owing to its differing meanings under differing contexts. 'Youth' is a distinct stage and identity to target development interventions around gender norms. It is at this point in which it is believed gender norm socialisation is arguably intensified and reinforced (e.g. to carry out a hyper-masculine persona as a young man) and reinstated by social institutions (e.g. the expectation for young women to marry) (Hughes and Desai, 2019). This is not to erase processes of gender socialisation in the earlier years or adulthood, but to note that the onset of puberty brings a critical transitional period in which young people can assimilate, negotiate or reject gender norms (ibid).

The youth transitional period provides the opportunity to elicit sustainable changes around gender norms as individuals are yet to fully form their roles and values within their localised gender norm paradigm (Lundgren et al., 2013). Youth can, at the same time, be a life stage in which voice and agency challenge familial norms, "to be listened to within the home, school and community, and to have a say in major life decisions, including relating to schooling, work and marriage" (Baird et al., 2021b, p.1154). Young people are simultaneously recognised to disproportionately be the victim of many socio-political and economic inequalities of the world, as well as the target of much investment and change. Investments to transform health, education, family, and legal system to support youth capabilities are noted to provide highly favourable returns (Sheehan et al., 2017). Though various studies provide evidence to support such targeting (Pretorius et al., 2015; Yount et al., 2017), it is also necessary to consider the risk of over-burdening young people to become the 'agents of change'.

Based on a stage of behavioural and biological transitions (Arain et al., 2013), the UN constructs 'youth' as an identifier of those in the life stage of being 15-24 years old. This age range is justified by recent demographic shifts: "today, there are 1.2 billion young people aged 15 to 24 years, accounting for 16 per cent of the global population" (United Nations, 2018). This population boom is referred to as the youth bulge, in which the current generation of young people can either present advantages to their nations by entering the workforce or pose global-level threats in terms of large unemployment and inequality (Nandigiri, 2012). The youth bulge strips young people of their personal interests, characteristics, and autonomy; it is a population defined only by their age. These demographic statistics are then tied to responsibility:

“The active engagement of youth in sustainable development efforts is central to achieving sustainable, inclusive and stable societies by the target date, and to averting the worst threats and challenges to sustainable development, including the impacts of climate change, unemployment, poverty, gender inequality, conflict, and migration” (United Nations, 2018, p.1)

The logic of this rhetoric is that the sheer number of individuals adds up to the 'potential' of their power to tackle the global challenges they potentially pose. Should the youth bulge not be adequately controlled or influenced, the potential impacts are thought to lead to social, political and economic, instability. The 'Vision' of '*Resolution 70/1...*' (the original resolution for the SDGs)... states *“we will strive to provide children and youth with a nurturing environment for the full realization of their rights and capabilities...”* (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, p.7). The 'realisation of rights and capabilities' is tied to an individual commitment to SDG-framed values of sustainability, empowerment, inclusion, and equality.

There is limited research on the specific 'youth as agents of change' rhetoric across either SDG discourse or in broader development policy and practice. In the SDGs, young people are repeatedly framed as 'agents of change', in a way that becomes a preventative measure against the global challenges addressed by the SDGs. For example, youth are referred to as *“critical agents of change”* (p.12) that can pursue the values of the SDGs through activism as the sustainable development agenda *“lies in the hands of today’s younger generation”* (p.12). Young people are thereby both actors (as 'agents of change') and beneficiaries (being recognised as socio-politically disadvantaged) in the sustainable development agenda. Within this norm of youth as 'agents of change' involves the capacity- and knowledge-building of young people, and so becomes framed as the supposed 'empowerment' of youth; a theory of change that is interrogated in Chapter Five. Those who count as youth, under development rhetoric and the SDGs itself, are simultaneously 'at-risk' -be that of traditional social norms, failing their economic potential, or contributing to global challenges – and positive social agents (Kwon, 2019). 'Youth as agents of change' becomes a rhetorical notion to frame young people to be actors, as well as beneficiaries, in the sustainable development agenda. This places a burden – or trust in change for the better – on a group that is disproportionately socio-politically disadvantaged (Sheehan et al., 2017).

The valorisation of youth roles in delivering the SDGs can be rooted in the multi-stakeholder formulation of the SDG framework. The World We Want 2030 survey was an online questionnaire (by

the UN) to establish citizen prioritisations of global challenges such as internet access or political representation which was facilitated across development actors. A majority of respondents were under the age of 30 and gender-balanced (United Nations, 2018), though do not necessarily represent the views of the global youth population as a whole. The identity-based discourse of the SDGs homogenises the 'youth' identity, thereby disguising youth elites who benefit from generational wealth. Young people with the most capacity to enact change – or participate in the World We Want surveys – are those that already maintain a certain level of agency and freedom of opportunity, rather than those most normatively believed to be *'left behind'*. The use of identity labels in the SDGs acts to obscure wealth-based inequality, as well as other indicators of power imbalance or oppression. This speaks to a homogenisation of young people's politics and framing them as inherently 'progressive' or more gender-equal than the preceding generation (Choonara et al., 2018).

There are, notably, few specific targets that speak to the needs of young people, and most that do note them as a point of data disaggregation, such as Target 10.2 to "empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status" (p.21). Targets that relate to young people mostly fall into the domains of education and employment, intending to build their capacity to be 'agents of change'. Target 4.7 relates to a pedagogical change in education in which "learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development including... gender equality" (p.17). This target exemplifies that the development of the educational and economic capabilities of young people is based on their 'potential' as an individual to enact change under the sustainable development agenda. Yet, such few targets and indicators that attempt to develop the educational, economic, and political capabilities of young people do not reflect or support their positioning as potential 'critical agents of change'. The SDGs do not expand the broader context of young people's lives or shift their collective agency.

Where the SDGs are self-defined as people-centred (United Nations General Assembly, 2015), as a way to ensure the applicability of a top-down UN agenda to the masses, this ultimately places a burden on individuals that did not directly inform the goals. This is particularly true of current youth that would not have been old enough to partake in the aforementioned 'World We Want' UN survey that contributed to the development of the SDGs.

The SDG era is thereby defined by the politics of individualism. This is a term I use throughout this thesis to refer to the political ideology that holds the individual agent and idealised-self as distinct

from society, and that society is nothing more than the aggregate of individuals. Collective action is about individual interests, rather than challenging collective struggles. This takes responsibility away from state actors, supranational organisations, and the private sector. (Eyben and Napier-Moore, 2009)

The synthesis of literature in this section uncovered that youth roles are constructed in particular ways in the SDGs as a means to achieve other development outcomes, at the expense of their own desired rights or well-being (Baird et al., 2021b). They are homogenised and hypervisibilised. Such findings require further, critical interrogation as to how these constructs are imagined at the international level, beyond the SDGs. The ‘youth as agents of change’ model is valuable as a conceptual framework in this thesis.

2.3 The politics of the SDGs’ pursuit of gender equality and women’s empowerment

Why do the SDGs homogenise and hypervisibilise youth to serve broader development challenges? This section explores the political ideologies of the SDGs to consider why there is a chasm between the SDGs itself and the intention to respond to the heterogeneous needs of the global population. The pursuit of ‘GEWE’ provides a specific analytical lens with which to locate this interrogation, given this thesis is ultimately interrogating how youth agency is mobilised to pursue specific gender equality norms.

Norms

The SDGs represent a set of ‘norms’ to influence governments, NGOs, activists, academics, and citizens on values, ideologies, and behaviours about ‘social change’, ‘progress’, ‘gender equality’, and ‘women’s empowerment’ (Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016; de Vries, 2019). These values, behaviours and ideologies are ‘norms’ as they are *the communication of governmentality* (Sharma, 2006). The SDGs are a set of norms that instruct development policy and practice on how social change should occur, what social change should look like and who/what is valued as *‘left behind’* (Shawki, 2016a; Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019). The SDGs are a vehicle to convey what internationally agreed informal norms should be pursued by signatory states and used as a “standard against which performance can be evaluated and accountability demanded” (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019, p.6). The SDGs are not coercive or mandatory but a form of social reproduction: they represent the institutionalisation of ideas and guidelines on how social processes and human relations should be, and how they should be viewed (Bakker, 2003; Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016). The SDGs were formed

through a multi-stakeholder agreement, in which stakeholders (from governments, civil society, private sector, and activists) of different nations, belief systems, and economic contexts negotiated and contested the agenda's norms (Shawki, 2016a). The SDGs are the end product of a discursive process of norm contestation (Shawki, 2016b); norms toward values on environmental wellbeing, economic inequality, and 'gender equality' – among others – are amplified, erased, or diluted in the compiling of what is now normatively held as a sustainable development agenda.

'Gender equality' and 'women's empowerment' are highly contestable terms that often encompass empty, contradictory ideals (Engberg-Pedersen et al., 2019). Concepts of 'gender', 'women' and 'feminism' are operationalised in broader gender equality norms to regulate what is deemed possible, accessible, and acceptable or what a person feels entitled to do or practice or have or choose. The SDGs do not represent the birth of certain ideas and behaviours as norms, e.g. the condemnation of violence against women and girls (SDG Target 5.1) in the pursuit of 'GEWE', but the reinterpretation and reinforcement of these ideas and behaviours that can be rooted in preceding liberal development paradigms and logics. The SDGs configure the meaning of social change – such as 'gender equality' to mean the total elimination of violence against women (Target 5.1) or the omission of LGBTQ+ people¹⁴ – rather than “directly by imposing their ideas or indirectly through shaming opponents into conformity or resisting alternative interpretations ([a form of] power over ideas)” (Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016, p.323).

Colonial logics

Norms reproduce dominant forms of knowledge, discursive practices and institutional set-ups at the expense of alternative ways of being (Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016). In this way, the SDGs maintain colonial logic. Coloniality codifies social groups and inequalities as ahistorical and objective, obscuring the reality that historical colonial epistemes and hierarchies produced specific social discriminations (Quijano, 2000). Coloniality is maintained by global systems of gendering and racing through capitalist exploitation (Mohanty, 2013); themes that are not critically challenged but perpetuated in the SDGs. Lugones' (2010) 'coloniality of power' argues the following is achieved through the top-down imposition and universalisation of norms: firstly, the subjectification, dehumanisation, and othering of people, cultures, epistemologies; secondly, the universalisation and homogenisation of processes of social change and ways of being, to fit into the neoliberal mode; and finally, the lack of focus on

¹⁴ As well as erasing the existence of queer modalities or LGBTQ+ people, the SDGs have no reference to sex workers' rights nor reproductive health needs like abortion.

accountability from the colonisers/institutions in power. These three elements are attributive to the SDGs.

The SDGs maintain coloniality through espousing specific values, beliefs and approaches necessary for a 'just world', all of which are demonstrated in the indicators, targets, and goals and in the format of indicators to quantify 'sustainable development' itself (de Vries, 2019). The universalist agenda is a homogenised way of being that all must aspire to and as a singular pathway of development (Escobar, 1992; cited in Gardner and Lewis, 1996), erasing the plurality of (local) realities (Cummings et al., 2018). Disparities in power relations between the 'global north' and 'global south' set the foundation for this Western centricity that is foundational to the SDG Agenda (El-Meligy, 2019). It is questionable whether a radically intersectional and decolonial approach to gender and race is realistic in a global development agenda (Khandaker and Narayanaswamy, 2020).

The SDGs adhere to colonial logic that assumes the world operates through universal, innate and immutable 'norms' in its metrics (Scarborough and Sin, 2020). The SDGs follow a structure of 17 Goals comprised of a total of 169 targets, of which are measured by 1 to 3 indicators each (ibid). Targets will be achieved based on time-bound measurements stated by the indicators, which frame governmental and NGO policy and programme delivery. Characterised by standardisation and rationality, processes of emancipation and societal change are outlined as predictable and subject to planning – as evidenced by the time-bound, quantifiable targets and indicators format (de Vries, 2019). The valorisation of the technical aspects of development in the SDGs – particularly the use of indicators to measure progress – is argued by O'Malley and Johnson (2018) as derailing the radical pursuit of intersectionality and its agenda to *Leave No One Behind* (a core principle of the SDGs). For example, Indicator 8.5.1 addresses employment inequalities by measuring the "average hourly earnings of female and male employees, by occupation, age and persons with disabilities" (p.11), yet gender inequalities in employment are far more complex with regard to precarious conditions and intersecting marginalities of race and class (Esquivel, 2016). The reliance on targets and indicators in itself distorts the value of a social norm, wherein incentives, legitimate evidence, and policy choices are based on hegemonic discourses that simplify policy and funding actions (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019). Such practical failures in the oversimplification of multifaceted social problems are linked to ideological errors (Freire, 1976); that of both colonial and capitalist logic.

Capitalist logics

In the SDG agenda, depoliticised ideals of gender equality expose the capitalist logic of the SDG norms. Broader studies that interrogate the pursuit of 'GEWE' in the SDGs problematise the siloisation of themes as goals, oversimplifying complex issues to adhere to the neoliberal domain (Dhar, 2018; Dyer, 2015; Esquivel, 2016; Koehler, 2016; Razavi, 2016). These themes rationalise Telleria and Garcia-Arias' (2021) argument that the SDGs hold purposefully vague and empty ideals, as to be applicable for each signatory nation to "adapt the goals set by the agenda to its national needs and preference" (p.255).

The SDGs' recurrent use of terms like 'empowerment' or 'potential' can be related to Cornwall's (2007) 'buzzwords'; the vague, meaningless and depoliticised terms that are put into a chain of equivalence alongside "economics", "markets", "credit", "growth" (Cornwall, 2018), signifying the co-option of radical, collective processes of resistance and redistribution into the neoliberal domain. The notion of 'potential' is tied to expanding the human capital of women and girls to have a greater capacity to perform labour, which gives them passive subjectivities to be regulated in service of the market (Boyd, 2016).

The SDGs follow a logic in which gender inequality is instrumental in addressing social inequality: "the achievement of... sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights..." (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, p.6), pointing to 'gender equality' as a means to an end. The SDGs lack clarity on where inequality, power imbalances, or discrimination is located and perpetuated in society, which undermines the pursuit of seeking to renegotiate social, political and economic power. Gender inequality is a barrier to the pursuit of the sustainable development agenda: "the achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities" (ibid, p.6). 'Full human potential' is a phrase that is not expanded upon in the text yet requires further interrogation; it plays into the aforementioned neoliberal rationale that gender equality is a means to improve human capital and the ability to perform labour rather than as an end in itself.

There is no consideration of the power imbalances embedded in the institutional contexts that cause and maintain gender inequalities, shown by Target 8.5 on equal hourly earnings between males and females which erases the patriarchal context that allows wage gaps to exist. The discourse of the SDGs is generally based on improving women's access to institutions, in which indicators quantify the targets to be 'increasing the number of women...'. This emphasis suggests simplified funding decisions and measurable outputs that may forego the complexity of the lived experience; a reductive outlook

characteristic of the neoliberal domain (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019). For example, Indicator 8.5.1 addresses employment inequalities by measuring the “average hourly earnings of female and male employees, by occupation, age and persons with disabilities” (p.11). The target to improve women’s equal opportunity for employment excludes acknowledging that, beyond the employment opportunities, women in employment face inequalities in the ways of harassment and over-representation as precarious workers (Esquivel, 2016). Indicators 5.5.1 and 5.5.2 measure the number of women in public life as leaders, a critical factor in ensuring gender parity in political systems, but do not monitor the experiences of women in such positions. These examples demonstrate that the investment in women and girls’ participation in public life excludes reorienting modes of power within these institutions, where they will remain domains of patriarchal power.

The SDGs’ pursuit of ‘Sustainable Development’ does not seek a transformative renegotiation of social relationships beyond the individual and material, which is in contention with how ‘Sustainable Development’ is popularly perceived as radical and progressive. Capitalist logic dictates that the problem of inequalities lies in cultural and interpersonal relations. Tradition, culture, and the individual are burdened with social change.

The deregulatory and liberalised economic and social policy suggestions run in contradiction to the framework’s discourse of ‘sustainability’ and ‘equity’ (Gabay and Ilcan, 2017). Transnational corporations, international banks, and the neoliberal state are not prioritised by the SDGs as a site of redistributive economic and gender politics. The SDGs enforce no binding treaty, hard obligations, legal rules, and commitments, but instead impose a voluntary agreement (Odera and Mulusa, 2020). Global economic hegemonies relating to capitalism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity go unchallenged: it is only UN Member States that are (non-legally) held accountable, rather than, for instance, transnational corporations. Therefore, inequalities are posed to lie outside of the labour market and these global hegemonies (Roberts and Soederberg, 2012). According to the SDGs, it is ultimately nation-states that can implement the agenda, whilst civil society and businesses act on the side-lines to provide resources and knowledge without necessarily transforming themselves.

By locating a literature review of the SDGs’ politics onto ‘GEWE’, this section has found that the SDGs 1) set a top-down imposition of norms, which 2) follow a logic of universalised metrics, characterised by standardisation; these metrics 3) pose the problem of global inequality and injustice as on the individual domain rather than on neoliberal actors. The colonial and capitalist logic of the SDGs serves to uphold the status quo: exploitative cultural systems, wealth hoarding, and global power

inequalities. As a mandate for global development discourse and practice, the SDGs follow a history of colonial strategies and contemporary development interventions that manage and control populations of the 'global south' through the imposition of universalised norms. Such themes found in this existing scholarly work signify a disjuncture between 'GEWE' and the meaningful redressal of global inequalities.

2.4 Drawing on feminist theory

How can the mobilisation of youth agency in the SDG textual framework be interrogated to demonstrate these colonial and capitalist logics? Feminist theory exposes the ways that 'global south' womanhoods have been falsely represented and constructed to pursue normative ideas of 'GEWE'. This is a theoretical lens that can be applied to analysing youth agency in the SDGs.

'Gender equality' norms are in itself an area of contestation and debate that have been used to hypervisibilise and mobilise women of the 'global south' to serve popular development rhetoric. Histories of gender equality norms in development – from the Third World Woman model¹⁵; the Women in Development¹⁶ paradigm; the Gender and Development¹⁷ paradigm; and 'smart economics'¹⁸ – represent a basic premise of guiding women of the 'global south' toward predetermined norms of modernity and equality as recognised in the SDGs. I refer to these collective themes as white, liberal feminisms owing to their ethnocentrism – discussed later in this section by Cornwall (2008; 2014) and Desai (2016) – and their embeddedness in liberal politics of individualism discussed by Eyben and Napier-Moore (2009) and Dyer (2015). It is here that white, liberal feminisms

¹⁵ Ethnocentric universalisms produce a false, dehumanised construct of the 'Third World Woman' (Minh-ha, 1989). It follows a "depoliticised logic of 'saving' and 'helping' the less fortunate [women] in the 'global south', ... and reproduces [inequalities] further" (Bandyopadhyay and Patil, 2017, p.644).

¹⁶ The Women In Development (WID) approach of the 1970s proposed women could be as economically productive as men when given access to resources, and so make efficient recipients of development interventions. Women were to be integrated into development policy frameworks both for their own benefit and for increased efficacy in the development process (Calkin, 2015a).

¹⁷ The Gender and Development (GAD) approach follows the logic that gendered power relations are the locus in which women's subordination and male domination were produced and sustained (Cornwall et al., 2008), not only women's roles and access to the labour market (Calkin, 2015a). Rather than integrating women within the frame of existing development institutions and projects as was the practice of WID, GAD sought to address women's practical and strategic needs both publicly and privately, specific to their particular societies (Jackson and Pearson, 1998; Engberg-Pedersen et al., 2019).

¹⁸ The 'smart economics' paradigm arose out of the structural adjustment period of the 1980s. The approach saw the pursuit of 'GEWE' as instrumental in improving development outcomes (e.g. reducing fertility rates, improving civic participation, and addressing environmental degradation) and economic growth (Moeller, 2013). A liberal feminist awareness of gender inequality came to be entrenched with macroeconomic policies that sought the positive correlation between 'gender equality' interventions and economic growth (Berik, 2017, Prügl, 2017).

are a pertinent lens to uncover how the development industry that once gave much-misplaced resources and burden onto womanhood now also locates these discourses onto youth.

In analysing youth agency in the SDGs, I can first consider how they are embedded in liberal politics. This comes from white, liberal feminist depoliticization of empowerment, which fails to subvert the power structures that imbue the subordination of women (Dyer, 2015). The operationalisation of women's empowerment in many development interventions is recognised to erase the "more socially transformative meanings associated with rights and collective action... or concern for any real changes to the existing oppressive structures (class or patriarchy)" (Eyben and Napier-Moore, 2009, p.285). The depoliticization of gender relates to the institutionalisation of gender in the development paradigm as "an acceptable euphemism that softened 'harder' talk about rights and power" (Cornwall, 2007; cited in Dyer, 2015, p.117), forgoing transformative structural change. Gender norms are instead sought to be shifted via an emphasis on "social welfare programmes and education" (Briant Carant, 2017, p.20).

White, liberal feminisms follow a theory of change in which the empowerment of women is based on rational decision-making and the development of their individual capabilities, often within women's economic, sexual and reproductive lives (ibid). It thereby caters to "ideals of individual freedom that are central to the Western liberal tradition" (Hickel, 2014, p.1355). It is rooted in the neoliberal rationale that follows the gendered and racialised stereotyping of women and girls as selfless, entrepreneurial, rational-economic agents (Dingo, 2018). Known as the 'girl powering of development' (Calkin, 2015a), women and girls are responsible for pulling themselves and their communities out of poverty that was caused by external institutions (Hickel, 2014). Liberal feminist analysis sees institutional failure as only the exclusion of girls in education, political participation, employment, etc. (Biressi, 2018), in which public institutions and the labour market should continue to operate as intended. This complements cost-efficient development programming, where 'empowered' women and girls can take on an educating, healthcare role in place of state-service provision, thereby overestimating the capabilities and labour of women as carers and young people as subjects with 'potential' (Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Boyd, 2016).

Young girls are, of late, targeted more so than older, adult women as they are framed as a lucrative investment by delaying motherhood and maintaining education (Koffman and Gill, 2013) – a dichotomization and essentialism that is, in itself, problematic and based on stereotypes. White, liberal feminisms set up gendered and racialised differences to advance pull-up-bootstrap ideals:

“young brown bodies [are linked] to arguments about girls’ potential (economic and otherwise), educational aspirations, economic investment, and international security” (Dingo, 2018, p.232).

The racial essentialisms of white, liberal feminisms present a second element in analysing youth agency in the SDGs. White, liberal feminisms assume their own globalising or universalising reach or applicability to all women’s lives, or a certain type of ‘female’ (Cornwall, 2016; 2018; McEwan, 2001). It is white, liberal feminisms in international development that frame the common misunderstanding that it is an international discourse which imbues women’s empowerment in the ‘global south’. In this way, white, liberal feminisms believe in the supposed superiority of ‘progressive’ norms originating in the global level, over norms from the local level sought as ‘traditional’. Nazneen et al. (2011) speak to how, in the Bangladeshi context, ideas associated with empowerment (i.e. rights, entitlement, advancement, emancipation) are not Western imports; rather they originate from domestic political traditions and are merely influenced by donor funding in the late 20th Century.

This essentialised worldview is based on ethnocentric universalisms, which also frame cultural practices and kinship relations as symbolic of the ‘traditional’ and ‘backwards’ nature of the ‘Third World’ (Desai, 2016). There is a parochial preoccupation with the domestic arena and intimate heterosexual relations in which men and their masculinities became one of the primary problems faced by women living in poverty; a version of social relations that eclipses other dynamics in the lives of people oppressed by heteronormativity and ignores the plurality of masculinities (Cornwall, 2014). Femininities and masculinities of the ‘global south’ are framed into normative ontological categories: femininity as ‘risk-averse’ and compassionate, family-orientated ideal of femininity; whilst masculinity is pathologised as too risky or irresponsible (Chant, 2016a, Chant, 2016b; Roberts, 2015). Development interventions that speak to ‘investing’ in women and/or girls (or youth) pose that “feminine qualities fit into “new, specifically neoliberal constructions of the ‘good’ woman” (Dyer, 2015, p.117).

In regarding youth as ‘agents of change’, feminist theory would suggest the burden of social accountability and service provision is reconfigured from those in power to the powerless (Cornwall, 2008). The SDGs seemingly mirror the white, liberal feminist framing of (women and) girls; the global youth population is poised to be a demographic that reaps highly favourable returns upon their capacity-development and knowledge-building. An examination of the specific white, liberal feminisms apparent in the SDGs’ imagination of youth agency follows – using the specific elements of

individualism and racialisation. Such themes are a closer examination of the colonial and capitalist logic already identified in the literature.

2.5 Youth agency in the SDGs: Individualised, liberal modes of change in the pursuit of 'GEWE'

This section is the first of two to synthesise literature on white, liberal feminisms with illustrative examples from the textual framework of the SDGs. The purpose of this section is to understand the SDG norms through the rhetoric they are placing young people within. This section does so by exploring the politics of individualism, outlined by white, liberal feminisms. The SDG quotes and information in this section are sourced from the indicators, targets, and goals comprising '*Resolution 70/1...*' (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) and '*Resolution 71/313...*' (United Nations General Assembly, 2017).

The empowerment of women and girls in the SDGs is broadly based on: improved livelihood capital, such as individualistic land ownership and ICT access; capabilities such as public participation and leadership; and human capital through equal employment or sexual health (Boyd, 2016). The SDGs frame women's empowerment, gender equality, and agency as norms that can be captured by quantified, time-bound measurements; it is a capitalist logic that assumes norms exist only in the individual, and so collective change is based upon the aggregate of change in individual minds and capabilities (Piedalue et al., 2020).

The SDGs' vision for achieving the 'world we want' fails; the SDG indicators are devoid of the multidimensional factors that maintain much of women's invisibilisation to policymakers, healthcare providers, and society in general (Anastasi et al., 2020). Indicator 8.5.1 (on measuring the average hourly earnings of female and male employees), Target 5.b (on increasing ICT uptake by women), and Target 5.5 (on improving women's participation and equal opportunities for leadership in public life) are examples of several indicators/targets in the SDGs that suggest women's lack of access to resources or public domains are the root of gender inequality. Where inequalities are implied to lie in lack of access, this foregoes collective attitudinal and knowledge change that is held by the individual, communities, employment and educational institutions which would ensure quality uptake and a reduction in experiencing stigma or discrimination. Target 5.b on enhancing women's uptake of information and communication technology (ICT) is measured by the "proportion of individuals who own a mobile telephone, by sex" (p.10). This target overlooks the direct role of ICT providers within

the private sector to make such resources cheaper and more accessible, and to improve ICT literacy. Target 5.b seeks change through individual access but foregoes suggesting norm change at broader, public and private service levels that act as barriers to women's access to ICT. Tying this to the overarching responsibility of youth to be 'agents of change', they are relied upon to pick up the slack. (United Nations General Assembly, 2017)

The over-inclusion of women in isolation is as problematic as the holistic exclusion of gender in the SDGs (Bradshaw and Linnekar, 2014). The targets and indicators of Goal 5 are based on the ontological position that 'gender equality' is achieved through targeting the empowerment of women and girls. 'Empowerment' is posed by the SDGs as greater access to resources and participation in politics and public life (Esquivel, 2016) for the individual; there is no discourse around collective action and power redistribution in the endeavour to 'empower women'. 'Empower(ment)' is used predominantly in reference to 'women's empowerment'. Usages such as "realizing ... the empowerment of women and girls" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, p.6) and Target 5.c on the "adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the ... empowerment of all women and girls" (ibid, p.18) indicate empowerment as an end goal or a finite point, rather than a continuous process. There is notably no discourse around collective action and power redistribution in the endeavour to empower women, nor for youth more generally.

Much academic literature on women's empowerment considers empowerment to be deeply connected with the (expansion of) agency and the ability to make life choices that were previously denied to them (Kabeer, 2005). (This relationship is explored more in-depth in section 2.9.1 ('Agency').) Such themes could appear to young peoples' agency in relation to empowerment too. 'Women's empowerment' and agency are often framed within a false dichotomy of either 'individual agency/liberal empowerment' or 'collective agency/liberalising empowerment' (Sardenberg, 2008), in which the latter is considered more desirable where it speaks to broader, institutional change. The former conceptualises women's empowerment as instrumental to achieving wider goals of economic growth or social and environmental stability rather than an end in itself (Kabeer, 2005). Indeed, "empowerment entails a process of change" (Kabeer, 1999, p.437) but a change in which an actor *gains* the ability to make purposeful, strategic choices. These choices mutually exist under the individual (material, social, psychosocial) and the collective (voice, organization, representation, community) domains (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007).

This is a pertinent theory to acknowledge around youth agency, given the ways the development of agency and empowerment are valorised in an individualised way in the SDGs. The neoliberal co-option of agency is referred to by Wilson (2008) as relying on strategies for an individual's survival and economic efficiency (e.g. livelihood, navigating poverty, environmental degradation and conflict), rather than the pursuit of collective actions towards challenging structural discrimination (Chant and Sweetman, 2012). Though important, a disproportionate focus on individual agency will: erase a patriarchal analysis that acknowledges structural oppression as the site of inequality; put in place neoliberal economic policies that support the use of individual agency for the economic efficiency of the individual; and place a disproportionate burden on the individual to enact broad social change (Wilson, 2008). In this way, the SDGs thereby rely on an 'empowered' individual woman and young person to be (unknowingly) complicit in modes of domination, through their agency as 'empowered' individuals.

The SDG agenda recognises that gender inequalities are held by and operated at the level beyond the individual, due to the various targets and indicators that are based on national-level legal change, such as Indicator 5.1.1 which measures the presence of a legal framework that "promotes, enforces, and monitors equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex" (United Nations General Assembly, 2017, p.9). This is not to assume that the SDGs would recognise the labour market as devoid of power relations, but that it is not a target for change. The SDGs principally envision gender equality norms as relevant only in the realm of the government and the labourer/citizen, justifying the onus put on womanhoods and on youth agency to pursue change. It is in this way that the SDGs correlate gender inequality to wider determinants of social inequality ("the achievement of... sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights..." (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, p.6)) that points to gender equality as a means to an end.

2.6 Youth agency in the SDGs: Spectacularised and racialised girlhoods in the pursuit of 'GEWE'

This section is the second to synthesise literature on white, liberal feminisms with illustrative examples from the textual framework of the SDGs. The purpose of this section is to understand the SDGs' norms through the rhetoric they are placing young people within. This section does so by interrogating the racialised spectacularisation of girlhoods, which is key to white, liberal feminisms. The following quotes and information in this section are sourced from the indicators, targets, and goals comprising

'Resolution 70/1...' (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) and *'Resolution 71/313...'* (United Nations General Assembly, 2017).

The SDGs present a contrived idea of gender equality that fails to acknowledge 'gender' as a construct that is imbued through white heteropatriarchal power across identities, requiring a multi-sectoral understanding of the engendering of institutions and practices. 'Gender' is a concept that is used in the SDGs though never directly defined in the text. This may be open to interpretation in a fluid, non-culturally specific way, but is likely to maintain normative ideas of gender binaries (explained further, later in this section). Out of the 230 indicators across the 17 goals, 53 indicators (including the 14 under SDG5) explicitly reference women, girls, gender or sex (Odera and Mulusa, 2020). 'Gender' is employed in three ways (United Nations General Assembly, 2015): within the concept of gender equality/inequality (e.g. "achieve gender equality" (p.18)), noting disparities and gaps ("[Target] 4.5: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education" (p.17)), and through gender sensitivity ("[Review processes] will be people-centred, gender-sensitive" (p.32)).

The SDGs refer to eliminating gender disparities in education as "increasing investments to close the gender gap" (p.7) that is present in institutions. The gender gap is not explicitly defined but is referred to Target 5.5 (public participation and decision-making) and Target 5.a on land, property and finance rights. 'Sex' rather than "gender" is used as an identity marker and as an axis of marginality, e.g. "irrespective of sex, age, race or ethnicity..." (p.7). Where 'gender' is not directly used as one's identity, this gives insight into more binary ideas of sex/gender that are posed by the SDGs. The mandate of 'youth as agents of [changing gender norms]' is blurry at times. (United Nations General Assembly, 2017)

The 'vision' of the SDGs provides an insight into how gender equality is grounded: "a world in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, p.4). Gender equality is intimately tied to the empowerment of women and girls and is based on increasing their social and economic capital. The document notes that "women and girls must enjoy... equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership and decision-making at all levels" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, p.6), and so gender equality can be proposed as improving the access of women and girls in existing patriarchal domains. Feminist theory is relevant here to provide critical analysis: girlhoods and womanhoods are falsely characterised by the development industry as "empowering

sexed subjects to self-manage and self-govern" (Repo, 2014, p.307) upon given equal access to the free market as the ideal worker and consumer (Pincock, 2018).

The relatively frequent usage of 'woman' / 'women' / 'female' in the raw text of the SDGs broadly refers to the pursuit of women's empowerment and gender equality that is 'enjoyed' by women (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). It can be inferred that the pursuit of gender equality is only to be benefitted by women (and girls) rather than other gender identities, as well as its role in informing the sustainable development agenda. Of the 16 uses of 'Girls', it is mostly referenced alongside women, as 'women and girls' in Goal 5 ("Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (ibid, p.18) and several of Goal 5's respective targets, noting an age disaggregation of the female identity and experience to pursue gender norm change. The regular usage of 'women and girls' alongside language around "full human potential" (ibid, p.6) constructs potentially empowered subjects with untapped potential who occupy a marginalised axis of identity. Chant (2016a) argues that such a framing finds girls are justified to be empowered only to serve others, not as a goal in itself. They are targeted by the sustainable development agenda to hold responsibilities to enact change because of their current status as 'unempowered'.

Men and boys are referred to as an individual identity group only 3 times across the SDGs, and issues that speak directly to the needs of masculinities or the inclusion in Goal 5 are generally erased (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). This shows that the pursuit of gender equality does not seek to include masculinities or male power except for their implied role in violence and discrimination (Target 5.2), inadvertently vilifying the male role within the SDG agenda. The burden of gender norm change in the SDG agenda does not directly lie with men and masculinities, heteronormativity, or an explicitly noted patriarchal power. The SDGs soften talk of rights and power (Cornwall, 2007; cited in Dyer, 2015). There is no usage of a term such as "patriarchy" that indicates pre-existing power structures and ideologies that imbue the subordination of women, heteronormativity, or inequality based on gender identity.

The construction of youth agency is one based on heteronormativity. The SDGs maintain the erasure of diverse gender and sexual identities through the exclusion of LGBTQ+ identities and epistemes and in the statistical measuring of a defined group known as 'women' or 'men'. There are no terms in '*Resolution 70/1...*' (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) that captures LGBT or queer identities, experiences, or rights. This broad identity group is not included as an axis of marginality in both targets and the preamble of the document, i.e. "irrespective of sex, age, race or ethnicity, and persons with

disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations” (ibid, p.7). The usage of ‘gender’ in the SDGs encapsulates biological understandings of sex, rather than a more complex and culturally specific notion of gender. There is no endeavour to disrupt this social construction, as “male and female sexual identities are a given” (Icaza and Vázquez, 2016, p.3). Western, colonial constructs of gender are maintained as the SDGs frame the ‘category’ of women as the homogenous, a priori grouping of the oppressed (McEwan, 2001). Diverse gender and sexual identities or issues are not valued as ‘left behind’ in the *Leave No One Behind* agenda, a concept that is itself contestable. By foregoing language that captures the inequalities and rights-needs of sexually- and gender-diverse people, they are implied to not be of value to the sustainable development agenda. This is notable given that, were the targets of Goal 5 to be achieved, equality for people of non-hegemonic genders and sexualities will not be reached. It must be noted, however, that following normative global discourse on LGBTQ+ rights can, itself, be too narrow and inapplicable to alternate terms and concepts relating to sexual and gender diversity.

Cultural sensitivities in employing a universal agenda for norm change shape this erasure. Though sexually- and gender-diverse people exist everywhere, their public rights are yet to be recognised. Policy instruments such as the SDGs could, but do not, navigate whether this subject is worth advocating for change. Similarly, sex workers have also been excluded from the SDG agenda (e.g. for rights to recognition and quality employment conditions). The SDGs call for legal changes in signatory states’ national policies across various indicators but decide against a norm for providing legal recognition and protection for sex workers. As the SDGs are the endpoint of norm contestation, this process involved filtering out certain injunctive norms that do not cater to worldwide acceptability. This demonstrates the coloniality of an agenda for social change that seeks to set injunctive norms across the world.

The SDGs set aside race as supplementary to other agendas and measures in the framework, owing to the Western-centric, categorical logic that defines gender equality as women-only. ‘Race’ is packaged with other modes of marginality, while ‘whiteness’ is the universalised norm, based upon the white-centricity of white, liberal feminisms that are apparent in the SDGs. This is reflected in the diversity of identity categories by way of promoting ‘inclusion’ into this dominant frame: “... irrespective of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, disability or other status” (United Nations General Assembly, 2017, p.14). Attempts at ‘measuring’ gender equality fall flat under a rubric that fails to provide an intersectional lens to systems of oppression and inequity. The SDGs represent hierarchical dichotomies and categorical logic

which leads to non-normative identities, race, gender, and sexuality as exceeding colonial sensemaking (Lugones, 2010): where do measurements sit for the multiplicity of identity (Stuart and Woodroffe, 2016)? Intersections of multiple marginalities are masked in the delivery and measurement of the agenda to ‘transform the world’. In the SDGs, the benchmarks for progress are contrived in that there is no recognition of hierarchies within marginalities, such as colourism, wealth, migration status, or anti-Blackness (Khandaker and Narayanaswamy, 2020). Challenging only one systematic oppression – gender – is ineffectual when it is the convergence of systems of oppression that maintains global gender inequity (Kagal and Latchford, 2020). And so, the SDG agenda to *Leave No One Behind* fails when there is no method to address multiple axes of marginality in which, beyond the ‘West and the Rest’, gender is imbued differently across geographies, nationalities, races, genders, sexualities, classes, and belief systems, ableness (Stuart and Woodroffe, 2016).

Considerations around white-centricity and a failure to include intersectionality in the SDGs signal the deeply racialised way in which personhood is imagined in the SDGs. White, liberal feminisms set up the archetypal girl who is representative of the ‘global south’. Her empowerment is presented as an alternative to social provision, a means through which their gendered productive and reproductive labour can be mobilised for the neoliberal development project (Wilson, 2017b). Girls in this discursive practice are subject to much surveillance based on their reproductive capabilities and sexual agency. The heteronormativity of the SDGs is key here: girls’ future economic productivity (i.e. income rates, or financial assets) is based on school leaving age, and so girls must delay childbearing or marriage. It is a logic that distinctly ties heteronormativity with neoliberal economics (Moeller, 2013). There is no consideration for alternative pathways in life, regardless of schooling quality or job opportunities.

Putting together elements of heteronormativity, white-centricity, liberal politics, and emphasis on girlhoods in the SDGs, it is possible to suggest youth agency is spectacularised and feminised. The spectacularisation of girlhoods is deeply embedded in the white, liberal feminist imagination of femininities in the ‘global south’. It is a racialised subjugation that fails to present a nuanced understanding of the complexity and diversity of girls’ lives (Cobbett, 2014). In the SDG textual framework, transnational girlhoods are constructed as multiple contradictory characteristics, at once: she is simultaneously “constructed as having limitless power in a world [where] the need for political change do[es] not exist” and “victims in need of rescue and protection” (Vanner, 2019, p.121); she is capable and hardworking whilst constrained by cultural norms; and she has agency but is in need of assistance from transnational donors (Shain, 2013). This spectacularisation and over-inclusion is a contentious issue, as described by Shain (2013; cited in Chant, 2016b):

“Girls have until recently been invisible in development discourses, or marginalised as the sexless dehumanised symbols of poverty, crisis and famine ... In the last decade, however, girls and women have come to occupy a central place as subjects, objects and conceptualisers of development” (Shain, 2013; cited in Chant, 2016b, p.7)

Discourses around ‘youth as agents of change’ are demonstrative of a wider difficulty in gender and development that struggles to balance a focus on young girls without placing disproportionate responsibility to enact change onto them.

2.7 Why is youth agency given such emphasis in the SDGs?

In light of feminist theory applied to the gender equality agenda in the SDGs, this section proposes why youth agency is, too, mobilised under specific justifications of 'inclusion' and white normativity.

It is necessary to question the over-extension in the ‘inclusion’ of ‘youth’ in the SDG era. These ‘white-led inclusions’ are a form of ‘racial chauvinism’, in which marginalised people may be given a ‘seat at the table’ but must conform to the terms of the debate (Amos and Parmar, 1984; Berenstain, 2016). In the SDG era, the terms of the debate are white, liberal feminist epistemologies which entrench colonial markers of gender and sexuality in pursuit of liberalised notions of empowerment; only certain types of feminist resistance count in these spaces. The façade of inclusion of the most ‘*left behind*’ in the formulation and delivery of the goals serves to control and absorb dissent (ibid). Freire (1976) refers to the extension of development projects as ‘cultural invasion’ and modernisation. Perhaps, the inclusion of the marginalised in the promotion of liberalised development agendas is also a form of invasion, by making them actors of their colonial agenda. The project of inclusion becomes a way to hold power over youths (Kothari, 2005), as they are converted into governed beings as ‘agents of changing gender norms’ (Gabay and Ilcan, 2017).

More broadly, Calkin (2015b) refers to the role of girls in development as a performative communication of a feminism that “combines tropes of neo-colonial ‘saving’ with the business ontology of neoliberalism” (p.664). Their ‘voices’ are amplified in international development to complement existing narratives and programmes already in place that address equality through ‘greater access’ (Khoja-Moolji, 2016), and thereby invalidate any critical analysis of unequal global socio-political and economic relationships (Switzer et al., 2016). The spectacularised girl activist is a

racialised, gendered, and aged figure who is defined by their heroism in her community, hopefulness about the future, and harmlessness in her neutral personal politics (Taft, 2020).

'Real' political resistance cannot be formalised or deemed acceptable and reasonable by those in power (Roy, 2014), rather it should work to deconstruct the norms that maintain coloniality. Yet, the SDGs outline a mandate for development that is more likely taken up – or more widely implemented – by NGOs, multilateral institutions, private foundations, and governments than individual activists or community groups. The former makes up the 'professionalised' architecture of development through "creating social change through local programming, capacity building, and support to activists" (Bashi et al., 2018, p.451), and so political change is popularised by respectability, salaried positions, and tick-boxes (O'Malley and Johnson, 2018). This becomes the 'NGO-isation of resistance' (ibid), in which resistance is framed, funded, and controlled by NGOs and other aid organisations. Where participation and consultation are considered prerequisites to empowerment, the inclusion of local community members can serve to secure their compliance with the project and validate external, pre-approved strategies (Kamruzzaman, 2020). This ultimately justifies the rollback of the state and cost efficient development solutions in the name of citizen-led NGO-ised change, which differs from people-led, grassroots action. In speaking about white, liberal feminism embedded in the SDGs, the people involved were not necessarily all Western white women. The formation of goals came from 'global south' activists too, but the fostering of appropriateness for a universalist agenda was set by white liberalism. This is to say that the global, institutional space of the UN is ultimately framed by white normativity and Western hegemony. The liberal feminist politics of 'inclusion' and 'representation' in setting a 'global' agenda for development (Hudson, 2012) are thereby embedded in the promotion of 'youth as agents of change'.

In this textual analysis of the SDGs, it can be argued that the 'youth' in the 'youth as agents of change' towards gender equality is a euphemism for 'global south' girlhoods. It is the white normativity and liberal feminist politics of inclusion and representation that gives way to girlhoods as a spectacle in international development; in which girls are subject to everyday surveillance and discipline under the discursive practices relating to normative ideas of development and gender equality (Desai, 2016). They are required to situate themselves within "discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice" (Gill and Scharff, 2011, p.6); and have the responsibility to bring themselves and their communities out of poverty and into male-dominated institutions and spaces (Dyer, 2015). Girls are rooted in the neoliberal rationale that follows gendered-stereotyping and geographical fetishization of girls as selfless, entrepreneurial, rational-economic agents (ibid). The altruism of the youth population is

predicated on a binarised idea of femininity and the empowered woman saviour. Masculinities and boyhoods are either invisibilised in comparison to femininity or included under specifically racialised assumptions that vilify Black and Brown men. Where young girls – particularly those of the 'global south' – have been continually framed as saviours of the world, the SDGs do not ease this burden but reinforce it with 'youth as agents of change'. Explicit mentions of race are secondary to the SDG framework, and so the white Western 'female' domain remains normative, while the Black and Brown girl is the exception and will thereby 'change the world'.

The feminisation of the apparently gender-neutral 'youth' is akin to the mobilisation of womanhoods throughout the history of gender and development. Youth that count must fit into discourses of the youth bulge, follow the politics of inclusion, and be coded as an othered, female symbol under neoliberal feminist development. In development discourse of the SDG era, there is comparatively little value attributed to a boy wishing to deconstruct legacies of colonial gender binaries. This analysis of the SDG framework is one way that youth agency to pursue gender equality norms is imagined in the SDG era.

The crux of this thesis is to investigate how youth agency is envisioned elsewhere in the SDG era. 'Youth as agents of change' is the primary mandate in the youth development paradigm of the SDG era. The norms of the SDGs travel in such a way that young people are codified to justify their responsibility to affect change. Response to the SDGs by development actors demonstrates that the invisibility of youth in the SDG Resolutions has led to the visibility of youth in the delivery of, and data collection towards, the SDGs (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), n.d.). It is here that the 'youth as agents of change' model offered up by this thesis holds value, as to make sense of how these logics of youth agency may manifest in development actors.

2.8 GAGE and the SDGs

GAGE, as a development actor, also holds criticisms of the SDGs' monitoring of youth issues. GAGE's aims are central to the SDGs, as the evidence produced by GAGE demonstrates that age- and gender-specific needs are given their rightful focus. In-built into GAGE is a belief that an international agreement such as the SDGs can be proven to be on track, so long as there are effective tools and methods for tracking the progress on adolescent girls and boys. GAGE is simultaneously working to support the overall goal for the SDGs to be inclusive of tracking the progress of adolescent girls and

boys, despite this falling outside the remit of the SDGs. Beyond research on programmatic countries, GAGE has published analyses on the SDG framework and progress so far. (GAGE Consortium, 2019)

GAGE directly acknowledges the SDGs' failure to call for action on robust data to capture adolescent lives and needs. GAGE research finds the SDGs are insufficient in calling for action on youth and gender-related issues, whereby less than 8% of 232 SDG indicators are gender- and youth-specific; only 18 indicators call for disaggregated data monitoring across gendered and youth-specific age categories, and these indicators only fall under 6 of the 17 goals (Guglielmi and Jones, 2019). With very few indicators explicitly calling for disaggregation by gender- and/or youth-specific age categories, "too little data will be accrued on young girls' and boys' lives, which means that their specific needs and vulnerabilities remain largely invisible to policy and programme designers" (Guglielmi and Jones, 2019, p.1). In terms of technical implementation of the SDGs, GAGE finds there are no clear guidelines to coordinate country reporting on *Leave No One Behind* commitments, which should include marginalised youth, on a global scale (ibid). Owing to insufficient indicators, SDG monitoring has failed to capture the complexity and diversity of young people's needs (Guglielmi et al., 2021a). For example, lack of nuanced data disaggregation has led to aggregating youth to be 'ages 5-17' despite "vastly different capacities, trajectories and development of a 5-year-old when compared to a 17-year-old, including regarding identifying and reporting experiences of violence" (ibid, p.14).

As a UK Aid-funded programme, it is notable that GAGE can be critical of the SDGs, which the UK government has signed to meet. GAGE's criticisms speak to the SDGs' technical mode of categorising the social world but provide little ideological critique to contextualise the SDGs' oversimplified metrics. In other words, GAGE does not speak to the colonial and capitalist logic that ultimately misaligns with the needs of young people. And so, this thesis builds on GAGE's assertions by contextualising the failings of the SDGs within the white, liberal feminist epistemology. Such consideration is necessary for understanding international actor disjuncture with local ideas of youth agency, with its origins being that development actors cannot bridge technocratic critique with ideological, shown in GAGE. This is explored further in dialogue with development actor theories of youth empowerment, in Chapter Five.

Part 2: Youth in the gender norm change process

2.9 Understanding youth agency to enact change under prevailing gender equality norms

So far, this chapter has established how racialised and liberalised assumptions of youth (and womanhood) lead to specific pathways in which gender equality norms are imagined, as institutionalised in the SDGs. The concept of youth agency – particularly to enact change – is at the centre of this thesis. There is little direct literature on young people’s agency to pursue gender norm change under the rubric of imposed gender equality norms of the SDGs. To adequately explore the literature on this process, this literature review section explores agency around gender norm change (that particularly pertains to womanhood), then zooms in on what this looks like for individuals experiencing a constraint in their agency (i.e. youth) through Structuration, and then contextualises how the 'youth change agent' is situated within norm theory to understand how imposed norms may travel. In doing so, it brings into dialogue theory on how an imagined individual is situated within the gender norm change process and imposed upon 'gender equality norms' through the domains of agency, structuration, and norms. It is then proposed that these bodies of literature can sit in dialogue to explore youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms at the local level.

2.9.1 Agency

Much like how this literature review has so far applied feminist theory as a lens in youth roles in the SDGs, literature on youth agency can be explored through the domain of how woman's agency is situated in the gender norm change process.

Agency is the intent of will through the capacity to achieve desired and intended outcomes (Giddens, 1984). Literature on agency concerning gender norm change often occupies a nexus that connects agency and gender with (women’s) empowerment. “Empowerment entails a process of change” (Kabeer, 1999, p.437) in which an actor *gains* the ability to make purposeful, strategic choices that were previously denied to them. It is these *choices* which I refer to going forward as agentic practices, actions, and values, but more simply *agency*.

This is not to say that Kabeer (1999; 2005; 2018) poses agency as synonymous with empowerment, but that agency sits as a component of empowerment. For Kabeer, empowerment is comprised of three indicators: Firstly, resources are the preconditions of empowerment – the access to material, human and social resources, including the ability to access these in the future. Secondly, agency is the

constantly negotiated ability to make meaningful decisions. And finally, resources and agency comprise one's capabilities (or potential) to function and bring about valued outcomes, known as achievements. Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) note the link between agency and women's empowerment as a process in which women collectively gain access to information, social inclusion and civic participation, and governmental accountability to have the resources and capabilities to become empowered to exercise agency. Goetz and Jenkins (2016) regard Kabeer's (1999) tying of empowerment to agency as underlying the process of increasing people's ability to make choices and highlighting "the inequalities in people's capacities to make choice" (Goetz and Jenkins, 2016, p.439).

In the development industry imagination, women are posed as empowering themselves through self-reliance, whereby it is the interventions of resource access that are thought to be the missing link in women's empowerment. This will be explored in Chapter Five. An oversimplification of this logic is assuming women already have self-determination, critical consciousness and opportunities for decision-making. For the 'youth change agent' to pursue change through their agency, they would be recognised to be empowered. These insights are useful for this thesis in analysing how youth empowerment may be imagined at the international level (RQ 3).

Resources, agency, and opportunities do not automatically translate into empowered women for Kabeer (1999), but the development of critical consciousness and the capacity for women to self-determine can lead to a transformation of circumstance. Kabeer (2005) notes that agency in individuals is a minimal factor in the broader endeavour to transform the systemic reproduction of social and gender inequality. Rather, agentic action by individual women must also be practised collectively, alongside public organization and the upheaval of power in formal arenas (ibid). Bertrand et al. (2017) refer to a separate category of agency: that of 'transformative agency', in which it is the continuous, heterogeneous and cooperative actions that invoke systemic change. Control over resources is a largely inapplicable concept to youth agency. Rather, their agency is to pursue actions and values that are transformative for changing the way people live and behave, their critical perspectives on the social world, and the functioning of institutions.

As noted in the SDG textual analysis earlier in this chapter, both women's empowerment and agency are conceived of as being operationalised in dichotomous pathways of either 'individual agency/liberal empowerment' or 'collective agency/liberalising empowerment' (Sardenberg, 2008). The former relates to women's empowerment as instrumental to achieving wider goals of economic growth or social and environmental stability rather than an end in itself (Kabeer, 2005). This is a false dichotomy

which poses the latter as more desirable where it speaks to broader, institutional change. Agency is multidimensional and subjective (Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015). Where agency is informed by assets and capabilities, Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) argue these assets and capabilities mutually exist under the individual (material, social, psychosocial) and the collective (voice, organization, representation, community) domains.

Nussbaum and Sen's (1993) articulation of agency comes through in the Capability Approach, which poses agency as the capacity to function by choosing to achieve or do something. Tied up in the Capability Approach is the freedom to make choices and to have alternatives in choice. And so, for young people, it is the ability to make meaningful choices that were previously denied, choices that go beyond meeting one's basic survival needs (Kabeer, 2005). And so agency in pursuit of the normative 'youth as agents of change' construct thereby requires going beyond basic capabilities set out by Nussbaum and Sen (1993), who speaks to the most minimally adequate levels of survival, i.e. to be an agent of change should entail youth have basic capabilities. Sen's (1992; cited in Robeyns, 2003, p.62) Capability Approach speaks to the "focus on what people are able to be and to do, and not on what they can consume, or on their incomes" thereby expanding the *way* people live their lives and not directly linked to material possessions (e.g. real income, wealth, opulence, primary goods, or resources) (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). This is akin to Sardenberg's (2008) 'collective agency/liberalising empowerment' and suggests "that changes in women's lives cannot easily be captured by 'functionings achieved' but rather they are reflected in small but daily thoughts and behaviours" (Conradie, 2013; cited in Dejaeghere, 2018, p.241).

A human agent is comprised of "complex, tangled knot of personal characteristics, contextual situations, and societal structures which comprise capabilities" (Anderson, 2016, p.132). Agency – and the capacity to incite change – is often conceptualised as the only positive actions of the individual and erasing anti-social agentic action. This is notable, given anti-social agentic action is still agentic action, such as practising values that are antithetical to normative gender equality values. This idea is particularly relevant to youth as a homogenised group who are inherently altruistic, as will be discussed in Chapter Three. In this way, it is necessary to pay attention to practices and values of young people that may go against the normative construction of 'youth as agents of change'.

Agency is the capacity to shift norms (Cleaver, 2003) and is nurtured by public action and policy (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). Agency is thereby not only about the ability to make normative decisions but to note its role in inciting change. The expansion of agency in the process of gender norm change

and /or empowerment signifies the transgressive nature of once-disempowered people being able to make choices that were previously denied to them (Kabeer, 2005). In other words, agency toward gender norm change is not only previously disempowered people making choices but that they are challenging social norms in making these choices.

2.9.2 Structuration

The relationship between structure and agency is central to the process of empowerment; wherein individual resources, agency and achievements – the components of empowerment – are shaped by “the rules and norms which govern distribution and exchange in different institutional arenas” (Kabeer, 1999, p.437). Structure defines what interests are and are not possible for actors to pursue, e.g. the justification of budget cuts to UK Aid, whereby girls’ educational attainment is falsely equated with achieving wider development goals.

Agency and structure are normative concepts that must be interrogated to understand young peoples’ agentic practices and values around gender equality norms. The relationship, duality, and exchange between human agency – both individual and collective – and structure are sites of debate. Human behaviours, choices and practices are informed by the surrounding historical, cultural, political, and social environment (Romaniuk and Francis, 2018). Muñoz Boudet et al. (2013) refer to an ‘opportunity structure’ around making a decision, made up of social and external factors – such as the presence of schools, the state of the local market economy, or the availability of reproductive health services. The decision-making process is itself subject to norms that shape engendered preferences, dispositions and behaviours (Romaniuk, and Francis, 2018). These norms regulate what is deemed possible, accessible, and acceptable or what a person feels entitled to do or practice or have or choose, which is further explored in the following section. Alternatively, structure can be informed by human agency. Human action, behaviours and norms can shape structures and socio-political and economic domains (Bhaskar, 2014) suggesting both the malleability of structure and the emphasis on internal change to influence institutions.

Noted as ‘Structuration Theory’, agency and structure are posed as mutually reinforcing and dialectic, in which “social structures are constructed by actors who simultaneously both influence and are influenced by them” (Giddens 1984; cited in Ratinen and Lund, 2016, p.117). Structuration theory poses that neither human agency nor society is regarded as having primacy and so views society neither as existing independently of human activity nor as a product of it (Dyck and Kearns, 2006).

Giddens' (1984) Structuration theory holds structure as made up of repeated social practices that vary across space and time to comprise the systemic form that maintains domination and power, i.e. the embeddedness of global 'gender equality' norms. Simultaneously, norms can be malleable through the daily practices of human agents exercising agency by making conscious choices to challenge or navigate such norms within structural constraints, thereby shaping structure. What is possible within one's own (resource-constrained) environment is indicative of the symbiotic relationship between structure and agency (Bhaskar, 2014).

Structure and agency are not necessarily oppositional but reinforcing (Hay, 2002). Further demonstrating the interplay of structure and agency is Bourdieu's (1977; 1984; 1990; cited in Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015) definition of individual behaviour as an embodiment of social structural positions. Agentic actions are framed by structural constraints whilst simultaneously being constituted by these structural forces (Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015). Overall, Structuration speaks to processes of enablement and constraint (Dyck and Kearns, 2006) in the kinds of actions and practices that an agent actor can feasibly achieve.

Agentic decision-making in the neoliberal world means that actors cannot necessarily be agentic through 'the expansion of their choice' when decision-making and political participation are set by predetermined options that are framed by structural constraints that prioritise market and consumer choice (Gershon, 2011). This is tactical agency (Bifulco, 2013) where 'change agents' have the knowledge, skills, and understanding to exercise their agency, but must negotiate the limits of their political environment. In resource-constrained environments, tactical agency remains an exercise of agency. Agency is the ability to exercise choice and is relational, context-specific and is dependent on the consequences of these choices. Perhaps, agency exists on a spectrum; on one end there is agency to be more effective and efficient in one's own roles and responsibilities – a passive agency that relates to little choice – and on the other, there is decision-making and functionalities that transform the conditions and "restrictive aspects of these roles and responsibilities" (Kabeer, 2005, p.15) that signifies an active, purposeful agency. These different kinds of agentic actions can be exercised in some aspects of life and not in others, for one person at the same time. Agency is continuous and operates through various points in time simultaneously: the opportunity leading to decision-making, the action and intervention itself, and the consequence (Giddens, 1984).

Young people are often restricted in their capacity to exercise strategic forms of agency to cause valued outcomes (Kabeer, 2018). 'Youth agency' is demonstrative of Structuration theory: the

navigation of social obligations and rules through individual decision-making and goal-setting, which is dependent on cultural context and the age and gender of the child. The expansion of agency is not wholly uniform in one's life, where an individual can make choices but can still face consequences for these decisions that are harmful, e.g. a young woman may be able to choose to study the arts in their schooling but will face gendered expectations from their parents that this is unacceptable. To consider youth agentic action and values requires recognition that, to exercise agency, young people must be capable to express and act upon their needs and desires without fear of the repercussions of their actions.

The relationship between structure and agency – experienced by the individual agent – changes over the life course (ibid). The concept of youth agency is a particularly constrained or limited moment of the life course, which is notable given the SDGs' proposition to shoulder the responsibility of social change onto young people. Youth agency is embedded within the confines of their households and often has little relevance to normative standards of capabilities that are often defined in literature and development programming on adults (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2013); that of freedom of movement, control over resources, or decision-making. The capabilities of young people are limited by their social positioning, asset control, and ability to move. Zimmerman et al. (2019) argue young peoples' agency pertains to voice, freedom of movement and decision-making within the household. Yet, the bargaining power to make household-level decisions is indicated by financial or material contribution to the household (Kabeer, 2018) and is influenced by prevailing gender norms, such as appropriate or inappropriate household roles based on gender identity. This demonstrates the intersection of limitations for girls' agency owing to their stage in the life course and gender in resource-constrained environments. Thereby, to challenge or alter gender norms is to change agency experienced by young people (Muñoz Boudet, 2013). Therefore, young people may be restricted in their capacity to exercise strategic forms of agency to cause valued outcomes (Kabeer, 2018), owing to structures of constraint.

The structure and agency literature is pertinent to both the interrogation of 'young people as agents of change' and to exploring what youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms looks like. Such insights are necessary to recognise that youth agents are not independent voices in the way liberalist citizenship discourses suggest, rather youth agency is interdependent on a myriad of influences. And so, youth agency cannot be conceptualised under Western epistemes of individualism nor be homogenised into a monolith (Abebe, 2019). The social environment affects young peoples' agency by dictating acceptable modes of gender norm transgression in the pursuit of predetermined ideas of

progress. Structuration thereby informs two modes: the political environment in which change occurs and the ideology of what changes *should* occur, such as the norms of the SDG agenda.

2.9.3 Norms

Norms are tied to structure. Norms inform governmentality; they prescribe the distribution of resources, rights and influence that often cater to deeply embedded values reflected in taken-for-granted behaviours and practices (Engberg-Pedersen et al., 2019). Norms comprise Doxa, Bourdieu's (1977) conceptualisation of the taken-for-granted rules and knowledge that comprise society and structure which inform the global, national, and local structure; it is rules and knowledge that both protects (e.g. legal rights) and disempowers 'youth' (restricting social contracts) (Engberg-Pedersen et al., 2019). Where the SDGs represent a set of norms on, for example, how reproductive rights should be framed at a global level, these values may also be held by, for example, an individual's immediate familial and peer networks and education (Marcus and Harper, 2014). White, liberal feminist norms around 'gender equality' in the SDGs uphold, perpetuate, and contribute to the structural environment within which young people operate.

Doxa is, however, malleable as it remains intact only when actors' functionings do not disrupt the naturalised way of things:

“power operates not only through constraints on people's ability to make choices but also through their preferences and values and hence the choices that they may make” (Kabeer, 1999, p.441)

The adaptation or transgression of Doxa is thereby a critical questioning of the often-uncontested rules and knowledge, in which 'doxa is turned into discourse' (Kabeer, 1999, p.441). Where doxa is contested, agentic action may be exercised, and so agentic action is constrained by areas of doxa that are non-negotiable (ibid). Of interest to this research may be the areas of life where young people feel they cannot negotiate their idealised behaviours and social values within their social networks, such as in kinship relationships with adults.

The norms of coloniality in the SDGs both influence, and are influenced by, human agency. The pursuit of 'GEWE', the SDG agenda, and broader social change will be partly constructed by the context in which it is operationalised, including human agents that seek to adapt, transgress, or reject these

norms. It is in this critical space in which human agents strategically resist, adopt, or adapt these norms in light of their own needs and desires. Through a situated approach to norm engagement, norms are recognised as dynamic, hold different meanings at any one time, and are interpreted by actors in various ways, meaning Doxa is subject to change. In this way, human agents can refuse to be objectified under normative discourses around 'gender', 'feminism', and 'social change' (Ortner, 1995).

Relating this literature on norms to conceptualising youth agency, it is possible to consider the ways that young people may strategically reject or adapt the norms that are present in their lives. Kenny et al. (2019, p.109) note that when young people "facilitate critical conversations across [their respective] social networks, including their peers, family, and other community members", young people can shift the norms of their socio-cultural context to pursue the behaviours and social values they envision for themselves. The ability to reject or adapt norms is itself a key component of youth agency, explained by Kenny et al. (2019) using the example of child marriage; it is a significant lack of girls' agency that prevents them from rejecting such norms (ibid). In this way, youth agency is not only the ability for young people to make a certain strategic life choice or have certain ambitions, e.g. for a young woman to pursue land ownership but that these life choices or ambitions may be a rejection or adaption of pre-existing social norms and values. To transgress norms, or cross the boundaries of traditional gender norms, is not equivalent to *changing* norms. To *change* norms is when collective practices and roles are recognised as a new standard or way of living (Marcus and Harper, 2014). This is a notable distinction to acknowledge in this research, as we can consider whether agentic action towards 'gender equality' concerns crossing the boundaries of gender norms or setting a new collective standard for gender equality norms.

The 'youth change agent' is thereby situated in a larger system, or structure, of norms. Norm theory states how ideas travel between actors, and these ideas are thereby transformed when they reach different actors, likely based on the actors' respective social, political, or economic contexts (Krook and True, 2012). Though these norms are institutionalised as the SDGs, they are in flux as they are subject to travel and to be translated by various actors at one time (Barnett, 2018). This is a situated approach to norm engagement, which is necessary to recognise the SDGs as more than a top-down doctrine, but one that may be adopted, reinterpreted or resisted by actors at all levels and at any time. And so, 'gender equality' norms and 'agents of change' in the SDG framework may be translated in different ways than what is implied in the SDG framework.

For the norms of the SDGs to travel, they are to be mutually received, filtered, and altered to fit the mechanisms and infrastructure of the context they are taken up in (Bonsu et al., 2020). Development policy and programming are, in a sense, a matrix of continuous negotiation and translation over the meaning of norms; the influence of context, history and culture over this translation; and human agency (Fejerskov, 2018). As well as the multi-level stakeholders that debated and then ratified the SDGs, it is the local staff of development actors that must be credited as norm translators in responding to the SDGs and wider development discourse. In forming policy and programming, they exercise their discretion to interpret and re-construct the norms as they deem fit within their context (ibid). Norm travel is thereby a reciprocal process, in which actors of the 'global south' are active norm translators or entrepreneurs, rather than passive adopters of international norms (Fukuda-Parr and Muchhala, 2020) – including the youth NGO interviewees in this thesis. It is in this way that international and local domains are in actuality not so mutually exclusive as is imagined in white, liberal feminisms.

The norm life cycle model demonstrates where development response to the 'youth as agents of change' norm of the SDGs will sit. Firstly, there is norm emergence (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998), in which there is sustained advocacy to institutionalise specific values, i.e. inputs towards framing 'youth as agents of change', likely from youth-centric NGOs and youth advocates (Shawki, 2016b)¹⁹. There is then norm cascade, in which the idea gains popularity and spreads across development actors, civil society, institutions, and states. And then, there is norm internalisation, in which the idea becomes the accepted standard and is no longer questioned (ibid). I argue that international response to the 'youth as agents of change' norm of the SDGs sits simultaneously between norm cascade and norm internalisation. In the era of the SDGs, it is a norm that is still being interpreted and implemented in development policy and practice (cascade) but it is also institutionalised as an accepted standard given its importance in the internationally agreed SDGs (internalisation).

Norms that are popularised by development actors do not exist in a vacuum (Schmiege et al., 2018). Rather, it is part of an ecosystem of interactions – other development actors will be popularising similar ideas and media will have rhetoric on the topic – which will also inform the youths' contexts. A norm – that of being an agent of change – will most likely reach young people via development actors, such as through media campaigns, advocacy informing national policy, and local programmes (Romani, 2016).

¹⁹ Known as a process of norm entrepreneurship, within the emergence and institutionalisation of norms, in which mainstream ideas are contested to be inclusive of more marginalised ways of thinking and doing.

Overall, 'youth change agents' should be recognised as a cog in a wider machine and not the primary actor for change suggested in the SDGs; they are one of many actors working at any one time in adopting, adapting or resisting imposed upon gender equality norms.

2.9.4 Agency, structuration, and norms: A lens to explore youth agency at the local level

The norms of the SDGs themselves do not mean the adoption of these exact values across international and local levels (Engberg-Pederson et al., 2019). Youth agentic values, practices, and action is the conscious pursuit of outcomes set by the agents' own free will (Giddens, 1984; Hay, 2002), which is specific to the environments of constraint and enablement experienced by youth. There is a duality and interchange between the structure one is in (i.e. the liberal, feminist epistemes) and agency (i.e. the choice to resist or adapt such norms). Literature on structuration and norms unveils the 'youth change agent's' own ideas around gender equality norms may differ from the liberalised, spectacularised assumptions of the SDGs and have their own heterogenous mandates for gender norm change, i.e. their own 'gender equality' norms, in the face the prevailing gender equality norms that are being imposed onto them.

How can youth agency at the local level be explored? This thesis bridges literature on agency, structure, and norms to serve the analysis of the empirical data in this thesis: to identify the practices which are attributive to young peoples' agency in pursuit of, or practising, their personal values on gender equality. Bringing these concepts into dialogue provides an analytical lens for the heterogenous ways youth may enact their own gender equality visions, under prevailing gender equality norms (i.e. of the SDG era). When analysing the empirical data, these considerations in conjunction will demonstrate the participants' personal values of gender equality. As well, it will expose the ways that young people may be strategically living within the taken-for-granted rules and knowledge that comprise society and structure (Doxa), to make choices to control their own actions and shape their navigation or transgression of imposed gender equality norms (Levey et al., 2018). The resistance to these predetermined norms is an exercise of agency by young people, though agency need not only be in opposition to domination. It is a consideration that gives space to how young peoples' structural constraints and influences may lead them to replicate the neoliberal politics that is also imbued in the SDG era.

2.10 Existing research on gender norm change in Bangladesh

To further support the exploration of youth agency in pursuing their own ideas of gender equality norms, at the localised level, it is necessary to understand the context of gender norm change (and imposed gender equality norms) of the young research participants and two of the youth-centric NGOs. Bangladesh is the site through which I exemplify the way that local individuals' youth agency may misalign with, or take up, international ideas of youth agency. This section is a broad review of the recurrent themes in women's empowerment literature from Bangladesh and the background to the history of gender and development norms in Bangladesh. It is followed by a synopsis of currently published GAGE analyses of their primary research in Bangladesh, demonstrating how GAGE may speak to the pre-existing literature on gender in Bangladesh.

In traditional, rural Bangladeshi society, the subordination of women is based on promoting the seclusion of women and enforcing their exclusion from public spaces, as mandated by the Islamic practice of *purdah* (Anderson and Eswaran, 2009). It is perhaps for such reason that Bangladesh's contemporary women's empowerment agenda is often misunderstood as a Western import (Nazneen, et al, 2011), as previously noted in white, liberal feminisms. Rather, Bangladesh is a complicated case study that represents the convergence of women's participation in the public sphere, neoliberal economic policy, and national-and-global feminist disjuncture.

From the Western state and non-state perspective, Bangladesh is recognised as an exemplar of neoliberal development, particularly for women's participation in paid work which is attributed to 1) the female-centric workforce behind garment industry exports; 2) rural self-employment financed by micro-credit; and 3) human development through means of women's education and reproductive health (Karim 2014; Hossein, 2018). Such processes were born out of the nation-building which followed the 1971 Liberation War. Bangladesh formed as an independent nation in 1971 following the 9-month Liberation War for self-determination against the governing 'West Pakistan', when Bangladesh was formerly 'East Pakistan' (Chowdhury et al., 2013). Millions of Bengali people were killed and displaced and, though numbers could not be verified, it is recognised by the Bangladeshi government that 200,000-400,000 women were subjected to horrific physical and sexual violence (Mookherjee, 2015).

In the face of nation-building, the Liberation War led to several consequences for women's place in the nation. New ideas sprouted by nation-building elites about the responsibility for outside actors to intervene directly into spheres of the familial and reproductive, which were historically deemed to be

private, be it by the state, non-state actors, or international actors (Hossein, 2018). This came from the breakdown of the patriarchal bargain²⁰, in which the traditional assumption of the patriarch protecting women of their household was no longer an adequate protection following the war (Hossein, 2018). Instead, independent Bangladesh sought to emphasise women's citizenship in their own right. The war created a population of female rape survivors designated by the new Bangladeshi government as *war-heroines* (Mookherjee, 2015). Sympathies and solidarity came from Western feminist organisations. International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) serves as an example of a then-new international funder to Bangladesh, supporting women's health centres and the adoption of war babies (Deb, 2021). Though these were lowly accessed (ibid). And so, in the newly independent state in which the private was now public, there was now space for more stakeholders – NGOs, international donors, public-private partners, and capitalist enterprises – to engage with Bangladesh's national development.

Western donor funding was at its peak in influencing the Bangladeshi state and NGO agendas during the 1970s-1990s period (ibid). It was during this time that global women's empowerment thinking put a large emphasis on Islamic norms around women's rights, in which religion was set up as a barrier to the 'modernisation' of women through economic, social and political participation (ibid). Based on an essentialised representation of Islam, global development discourse at the time overlooked the collective agency of pre-existing religious women's groups in Bangladesh (Nazneen, 2018). The Bangladeshi state's need to secure funds and gain international legitimacy required adherence to promote women's inclusion in the economy and the public sphere (ibid). It should be noted that, despite NGO and state-level influence by international organisations, Kabeer (2011) argues that Bangladeshi women themselves were not influenced by the imported values but in their shared struggles. As well, Bangladeshi political parties hold strong Islamic stances, as to be in contention with the influence of international organisations and demonstrate political independence (Nazneen, 2018).

Domestic policy change in 1990s Bangladesh towards greater deregulation was welcomed by the World Bank as a means of allowing Bangladeshi industry to be in collaboration with transnational corporations (Hossein, 2018). It is in this way that Bangladesh became one of the worlds' largest exporters of ready-made garments, dependent upon a majority-female workforce. Sachs (2005; cited in Hossein, 2018) attributes Bangladesh's garment industry for putting the country on the first rung

²⁰ Hossein (2018) defines the patriarchal bargain as a tacit agreement in which women would be protected against hunger and violence, in exchange for their reproductive labour and adherence to norms of seclusion and sexual purity.

on the metaphorical ladder out of poverty. The garment industry is praised by Western economists and many Bangladeshi national feminist organisations for harnessing the population of women to be labourers towards national economic growth (Hossein, 2018). Bangladesh's strength, from this neoliberal perspective, lies in harnessing its enormous population base towards low paid and unskilled manufacturing. There is an idea that garment workers are freed from patriarchal home life, yet they are forced to work in exploitative and dangerous conditions, their socioeconomic status has not improved, and they remain burdened with disproportionate reproductive and care work (Karim, 2014). Gender norms are not gravely changed despite national and global feminist narratives that suggest otherwise, and managers in garment factory are exclusively men (ibid) – thereby maintaining gender and financial power imbalances.

Much research, however, acknowledges the relative gained freedoms for women garment workers. Karim (2014) and Naved, et al. (2018) all recognise that, despite working conditions, these women have greater financial autonomy and agency to connect with other women workers, leading to the ability to collectively organise against an easily identifiable capitalist exploiter towards improved benefits and working conditions. Yet, the Bangladeshi government is actively against women's trade unions opposition to garment working conditions. The state's celebration of the women-centric workforce falls short of supporting women in their labour organising or alleviating the double burdens of paid and unpaid work. Women's empowerment means only their employment, as to appeal to Western donors and maintain the growth of the garment industry at a higher rate than if the women workers were afforded greater rights. (Huq, 2019)

In the same way, many of the larger Bangladeshi feminist organisations grew under the patronage of the state and international donors over the 1980s and 1990s, leading to the NGO-isation of much national Bangladeshi feminism. Karim (2014b) argues these organisations align with the western donor agenda which ignores class-based struggle in the name of making the individual poor, exploited woman the backbone of the economy with no rewards. Siddiqi (2009) describes that women-led unions and grassroots feminism organisations – in which the garment workers' needs are central – are divergent from global and national feminist (and economist) concerns that are justified by neoliberal economic rationale. In other words, it exemplifies the distinction between NGO-ised resistance and people-led, grassroots action discussed earlier in this chapter.

The garment industry grew alongside the microfinance model, in which women's empowerment

hinged on access to credit so that they can start their own entrepreneurial activity to improve their autonomy and their household income (Karim, 2014; Hossein, 2018). The total revenue and popularity of the Grameen Bank as a national lender makes Bangladesh a notable country for this endeavour to empower women. Yet, microfinancing is also an example of how Bangladeshi institutions lead the neoliberalisation of gender norm change, as described by Karim (2008, p.154):

“The out-of-the-home entrepreneur links seamlessly with the ideology of neoliberalism. She is an owner of petty capital. This production of the ownership ethic is against wage labour, overtime pay, retirement benefits and worker’s compensation, i.e. against the very foundations of a welfare state. Failure to succeed now rests solely with the individual and not with the corporation/NGO/state. In this scenario, the state withdraws from the welfare of its citizens to the welfare of capital.”

(Karim, 2008, p.154)

NGOs in Bangladesh, also partaking in microfinancing, thereby act to connect rural people to multinational corporations through their requirement to succeed in the globally-connected market or face the burden of debt.

It was during the peak of international aid influencing – particularly South-South influence – that there was a wave of national political support for girls’ access to primary education. This led to Bangladesh’s success in attaining gender parity at the primary and secondary levels in the 1990s and attaining the Millennium Development Goal in education (Nazneen, 2017). National political support for girls’ education was framed as a positive relationship to women’s employability, leading to gendered differences in valuing girls’ education: education was seen by men as exclusively financially beneficial; whilst for women, girls’ education is valued as a means of independence, confidence, and worth (ibid).

The inclusion of international actors from the 1970s-1990s also came at a time in global development in which women’s issues pertained to their reproductive labour, exemplified by the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo (Karim, 2014) and the USAID donor agenda which both emphasised population control as a means of reproductive health strategy (Jahan, 2007). Again, it was the rural poor of Bangladesh that were targeted in the national development process, through sterilisation and injectable contraception (Akther, 1988). Reasoned by donors as a means of women’s empowerment to participate in the free market and a pathway out of poverty, Akther (1988) argues that reproductive rights in this sense are closely tied to economic exploitation: for women to

have the agency to choose financial autonomy and participation in the working public domain as labourers over their fertility.

The vision of the rural, poor women's role in Bangladesh over recent decades is as either an exploited labour or indebted borrower. This has sprouted from an elite, NGO-ised feminism and a government that seeks to maintain its economic growth and close ties with international donors. It is apparent that class-based analyses are missing in the highly-funded, nationally-sprouted ideas about women's empowerment. Many formal Bangladeshi feminist groups are deeply penetrated by NGO discourse and often headquartered in urban areas and led by western-educated urban elites (Huq, 2019). It is for such reason that there is little interaction with working class women's needs and feminisms.

International actors have viewed Bangladesh as ripe for influence under the guise of neoliberal modernity, and it has led to grave changes in fertility rates, educational attainment, and financial autonomy. Yet, the uptake of these norms has diverged, from political party mandates to male views on girls' education to women trade unions fighting against their supposedly 'empowering' workplace. Bangladesh is more complex than the imposition of 'Western' gender equality against 'Islamic' gender norms. Norms around gender norm change and gender equality diverge within the country, exposing class and urban/rural divides that have ultimately limited improvements in the socioeconomic status of the most marginalised women. This demonstrates the value of Bangladesh as a site with which to locate the analysis of youth agency in pursuit of gender norm change, given its specific history in the gender and development industry and heterogeneity in gender equality norms.

2.10.1 GAGE's research activities and findings in Bangladesh

GAGE does not impose norms but investigates the negotiations of gender norms and norm change in daily lives. GAGE's research includes primary research in Dhaka, Cox's Bazar (including Rohingya refugees), Chittagong, and Sylhet and a policy and legal analysis of the National Strategy for Adolescent Health in Bangladesh. This section considers how Bangladeshi young people have been found in GAGE's research to experience gender norms and to be situated in gender norm change processes, in light of the context discussed above. In doing so, I am synthesising GAGE's research on the youth agency of the socio-economically deprived population of Bangladeshi youth.

Over 2000 adolescents aged 12 and 13 from across 109 public and semi-private schools in Chittagong and Sylhet were qualitatively and quantitatively surveyed recurringly throughout 2020, to form mixed-methods baseline data (GAGE Consortium, 2021). GAGE's analysis of this data finds household wealth and gender norms shape girls' educational aspirations, experiences and earning potential; child marriage still truncates educational and employment aspirations, despite shifting attitudes; and growing educational disparities are leaving poor and rural adolescents behind (ibid).

Regarding aspirations, Sultan's et al. (2021) research on youth in Dhaka's urban slums finds youth aspirations are shaped by multiple influences: parental support, location, local infrastructure, quality of public services, and community stability. Youth adjust their aspirations in accordance with their realities, whereby youth currently enrolled in school have high aspirations based on their educatedness and the judgement of community members regarding the achievability of said aspirations (ibid). Such findings indicate the malleability of youth aspirations, based on their environments and relationships with adults.

GAGE Bangladesh research extensively covers the importance of norm change at the time of adolescence, particularly for girlhoods. A 2019 mixed-methods study in Cox's Bazar with over 2200 adolescents across Rohingya refugee camps and host communities found that norms about appropriate feminine behaviour, combined with the physical developments associated with puberty, cause girls' mobility and agency to be restricted and independence outside of the home is minimised (Guglielmi et al. 2019). GAGE's research reviews across all countries argue this is often based on their subjectification as sexual subjects (Baird et al., 2021c) which is intricately tied to concerns about girls' chastity and potential as wives and mothers (Marcus et al., 2017). GAGE's synthesis of existing evidence on adolescent girls' capabilities in Bangladesh finds that it is during this life stage that girlhood becomes central to family honour, in which their voices, aspirations, personal decision-making, and community engagement is intimately observed and based around the family unit (Presler-Marshall and Stavropoulou, 2017). GAGE research on the locus between gender norms, rural status, and young women and girls emphasises agency and voice and how this relates to parental relationships.

The aforementioned 2019 Cox's Bazar study and 2017 evidence synthesised together put forward evidence to suggest that, upon the onset of puberty, the voice and agency of Bangladeshi girls are tightly constrained by conservative gender norms to preserve family honour and emphasise the importance of marriage and honour (Presler-Marshall and Stavropoulou, 2017; Guglielmi et al., 2019).

It is during this process that girls face pressure to develop the household skills and stamina they will need for marriage (Marcus et al., 2017). GAGE research in 2016 involved 274 participants – 177 of whom were adolescents aged 10 to 15 years, their parents, other adult community members and key informants at the community and sub-national levels – from urban (Dhaka slum) and rural (Northwest remote region) communities involved in BRAC's adolescent outreach programme (Camfield et al., 2017). This study found young girls, in these contexts, to have specific career aspirations and characteristics in their future marriages (ibid). This is likely shaped by parental aspiration for daughters to be educated and marry later in life, in favour of having a respectable occupation and engagement in public life, as well as a status as a wife; based on an evidence review draws on the analysis of 320 studies on the wellbeing of adolescent girls (aged 10-19) in Bangladesh (Stavropoulou et al., 2017) and 2017 mixed methods data with over 800 adolescents and their parents in Dhaka who are involved in adolescent-focused programme interventions as well as non-programme participants (Alam et al., 2019a). Such themes speak to Raynor's (2005) aforementioned posing that girls' education is not only seen as an end in itself but recognise to serve broader purposes.

Guglielmi et al. (2021a) similarly find that married Rohingya girls live in a context with dualistic attitudes toward child marriage: 1) traditionalist gender norms prevail whereby marriage is sought to be the predominant concern for girls as they enter adulthood, who must follow purdah; and 2) the Rohingya community welcome female sewing and tailoring courses for the married girls and women. Guglielmi et al. (2021a) analysis of Rohingya girls recognises the role of 'doxa' as the unquestionable practices and behaviours that reproduce norms around child marriage and gender in Rohingya communities. These studies provide a more nuanced picture of a context in which gender equality norms may exist in tandem with existing gender norms, demonstrating gender equality norms are situationally specific and the variability of gender norms in a given community. GAGE's approach to addressing child marriage is an example of GAGE's construction of change pathways. GAGE emphasises awareness-raising among students at the community level and to promote the completion of schooling. Alternative to early marriage practices for low-income households is also identified as a crucial intervention, in which girls must be given part-time skill-building opportunities to improve their earning capabilities whilst in education, rather than relying on a dowry.

GAGE's qualitative research on 64 adolescents (who ranged from children of higher socioeconomic status in Dhaka to children in a rural area in Cumilla) around Bangladeshi youth voice and agency through ICT and mobile phones finds that young people who do not have unfettered access to ICT or the internet are unable to spend time on the internet for research, education, or skill-building (Huq et

al., 2020). A 2020 qualitative study in urban low-income settlements found the negative mental health impacts of young people being unable to spend time in lockdown on the internet connecting with peers (Ahmed et al., 2020). In particular, the closure of schools and recreational spaces exacerbated girls' already restricted mobility outside of the family home; based on evidence from virtual phone surveys conducted with almost 7,000 adolescents aged 12–19, and caregivers in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan and Palestine, conducted at the end of 2020 (Jones et al., 2021).

In 2020, 39 Bangladeshi adolescents (aged 10-19) were interviewed from Chittagong and Sylhet and selected purposively to be representative of demographic characteristics such as gender, urban or rural residence, working or non-working status, disability status, and membership of female-headed households (GAGE Consortium, 2021). The findings show that girls' mobility in the time of Covid was further restricted in the context of their families, without formal employment or business or who work in retail and hospitality, losing their incomes. Another 2020 study based on two rounds of mixed-methods data on over 2,000 adolescents and their female primary caregivers in Sylhet and Chittagong found that the reality for out-of-school male youth in urban slums involved looking for paid employment out of economic insecurity and anxiety (Baird et al., 2020). Youth in vulnerable households faced decreased access to learning, increased time spent on household chores, and worsened future job aspirations (ibid). Where women's empowerment follows income control (Anderson and Eswaran, 2009) (discussed in section 2.10 ('Existing research on gender norm change in Bangladesh')), it is young people's financial contributions that determine their mobility outside the home.

GAGE recognises the multiplicity of constraints experienced particularly by youth in Bangladesh, from ICT access to economic insecurity. GAGE's findings emphasise household wealth and educational disparity. Class is a determinant of shifting gender norms. For economically-deprived youth, their inability to change their environment means they are bound to only be able to change gender norms within the household at most.

Across these research projects, themes speak to the gender norms and agency experienced by Bangladeshi youth and how these are impacted by rural/urban status, poverty, education accessibility, and digital accessibility and vice versa. In the endeavour to complement GAGE's findings around gender norms in the home and community – as experienced by young people – and to address any oversights, this thesis considers young people's views of gender norms, how they desire gender norms to change, and why. A PhD does not have the scope to see how variations in rural/urban status,

poverty, education accessibility, and digital accessibility may impact young peoples' agency. Rather, this research is sitting between literature on the broad 'GEWE' agenda in Bangladesh and GAGE's research on Bangladeshi youth agency, as to investigate how youth agency is manifested in changing gender norms. As well, this thesis gives space to young people from an urban, affluent and socially-engaged environment, an underrepresented demographic in GAGE research that is practical to recruit into the small-scale study.

GAGE's research is driven by an epistemology that acknowledges the complexities of disadvantaged groups, by using an intersectional lens in understanding vulnerability and marginalisation in their conceptual framework. GAGE recognises youth as 'actors in their own right' with the capacity to determine the course of their lives, the collective capabilities of youth, and heterogeneity of disadvantaged lived experiences (Baird et al., 2021b). This is in opposition to 'individual agency' and instrumentalization of youth rights and experiences explore in Part 1 of this chapter. GAGE's approach to change pathways in Bangladesh vastly differs from the history of international influencing on Bangladesh. Much of GAGE's research in Bangladesh speaks to themes of aspirations, parental relationships, and community norms as central to young people's agency, themes which cannot be fully accounted for in Bangladesh's history of garment work and microfinancing. These themes serve as useful areas to consider 'agentic action' towards youths' own gender equality norms. GAGE embeds its tangible datasets into the theoretical domain, such as Guglielmi et al. (2021a) analysis of 'doxa' in Rohingya communities. It is here that I can bridge with the theoretical aspect of GAGE's research, where I am incorporating literature on doxa into how young people relate to – or question – the gender norms and gender equality norms of their own lives.

2.11 Conclusions

This chapter has explored the multiplicity of youth agency to invoke gender norm change, from how they are institutionalised in the SDGs, to how youth agency is theorised in literature, to how they are situated in gender norm change in Bangladesh.

This chapter faced a challenge of how to explore the construction of youth agency in the SDGs when 1) youth are largely invisible in the textual framework and 2) there is little literature that directly exposes the likely links between youth in the SDGs and the colonial and capitalist logics of the framework. In 'Part 1: Youth in the SDGs', this chapter has explored the existing state of literature on youth agency in the SDGs, by placing the role of youth in the SDGs, politics of the SDGs, and feminist

theory in dialogue with one another. This thesis makes use of feminist theory that is critical of white, liberal feminisms to uncover how the development industry that once gave much-misplaced resources and burden onto womanhood apply these discourses onto youth. This theory presents an important lens in exposing the fallacy of imposed norms around youth agency, in which youth have been racialised and spectacularised under a liberal, individualistic logic. These provide a foundation for answering the international aspects of the three RQs.

In reviewing literature on youth in the SDGs, this chapter has included a synopsis of GAGE's assessments of the SDGs, which speak to their failure to adequately capture the complexity of youth needs in the targets. This thinking is useful to situate this thesis' analysis of how a development actor is simultaneously working to provide evidence for the SDG framework, is critical of said framework, and that this criticism is contextualised in an inability to ideologically speak to the failure of the SDGs owing to UK Aid's politics.

Questions remain over how the mandate of 'youth as agents of change' is taken up beyond the SDGs, to development actors at the international level. This is answered in the subsequent empirical chapters. The 'youth as agents of change' model is thereby a valuable contribution of this thesis. It uncovers development actor embeddedness in the SDGs' politics by providing evidence – beyond this literature review – around how youth agency in pursuit of gender equality is conceptualised at international levels.

In 'Part 2: Youth in the gender norm change process', this chapter explores theory of how an imagined individual – the so-called 'youth change agent' – is situated in the gender norm change process. This distinctive way of analysing youth agency is shown in this chapter to be necessary because, owing to the constraints experienced in the youth life stage, young people may be restricted in their capacity to exercise strategic forms of agency to cause valued outcomes. As well, Structuration theory uncovers that young peoples' agency may be dictated by what is considered acceptable modes of gender norm transgression, e.g. if young people feel unable to share their values around LGBT+ equality. And so, youth agency can include a rejection or adaption of pre-existing social norms and values or imposed gender equality norms, as well as the ability for young people to make a certain strategic life choice or have certain ambitions. Norm theory on the situated approach to norm engagement – wherein norms are given meaning in how they are received and translated – supports this thesis' stance on the inconsistencies and international in how youth agency is manifested at the local level and those imagined at the international level.

These concepts provide a foundation for answering the local aspects of the three RQs, by exploring the local-level youth agency arising in the empirical data. In bridging literature of agency, structuration and contestation of norms, this review has also offered an analytical lens to pinpoint in the empirical data when such themes will interplay in the Bangladeshi youth participants' lives. In this way, I can thereby identify youth agentic action in pursuit of their own ideas around how gender equality norms can/should change, in the empirical data.

The synopsis of GAGE publications on youth in Bangladesh, in conjunction with a review of literature on women's empowerment in Bangladesh, provides a key context for the changes in gender norms in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has, historically, been a site for white, liberal feminisms to locate their ideas of 'global south' womanhood as held back by ethnocentric ideas of traditionalism – whilst local-level manifestations of gender equality norms misalign. Women-led unions and grassroots feminism are divergent from global and national feminist (and economist) concerns that are justified by neoliberal economic rationale, exposing class and urban/rural divides that have ultimately limited improvements in the socioeconomic status of the most marginalised women. These considerations are a pertinent lens to Bangladeshi youth agency in pursuit of gender norm change, whereby there is room for considering the possible rejection, adoption, and/or adaption of imposed gender equality norms. In 'Part 2: Youth in the gender norm change process', this chapter has synthesised literature to recognise that individuals – particularly Bangladeshi young people – have a valid and vital role to play in replacing and negotiating the existing gender norms they live under, in accordance with their own ideas of what constitutes 'gender equality' norms. These ideas support this thesis' argument of the inconsistencies between the gender politics of the SDG era and youth epistemes, in which the SDG era's operationalisation of youth agency is a fallacy compared with the reality of participants' agentic actions in pursuit of their own ideas of gender equality.

3 Chapter Three: Why do attributes of youth align and misalign across international and local levels?

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of three consecutive empirical chapters that analyse youth agency in pursuit of gender equality in the SDG era in which I have deconstructed my analysis into elements of youth attributes, gender equality norms, and theories of youth empowerment in social change. This chapter specifically interrogates how young people themselves are attributed and imagined across international and local levels, thereby answering RQ 1: Why do attributes of youth align and misalign across international and local levels? It presents my analysis of international ideas of youth, by firstly 1) unpacking assumptions of youth in the 'youth as agent change' model and 2) exploring the kinds of youth who are studied in GAGE's research, based on the original analysis. Then, this chapter will explore how youth are conceptualised at local levels: in 3) exploring Bangladeshi youth views on youth roles and capacities; 4) how the participants perceive themselves in relation to the wider Bangladeshi community; and 5) how young people navigate their relationships with their parents and parental expectations as a manifestation of these attitudes and a kind of agentic action.

This chapter presents findings from the narrative analysis and the interviews with youth-oriented NGO staff which, in conjunction, can exemplify the 'youth as agents of change' model. The narrative analysis is of development actors' language in policy and programming documents across 40 source materials, pertaining to how youth are justified to incite change towards the pursuit of 'GEWE' through the operationalisation of terms around 'changemakers', 'empowerment', 'gender norms', 'leadership' etc. The NGO interviews were with three participants – each a representative from a UK or Bangladeshi youth-oriented NGO – and explored why youth-centred NGOs use the mandate of 'youth as agents of change' in the pursuit of 'GEWE' when delivering programmatic and policy action towards achieving the SDGs. This chapter presents two components of the 'youth as agents of change' model: 1) youth are set up to be altruistic and natural leaders and 2) the normative role for youth engagement within politics and rights.

These components suggest a vision of youth that is aligned with white, liberal feminist imaginations of femininities in the 'global south'. The former component positions young people as only pursuing positive, agentic actions (Chant, 2016a; Desai, 2016): they purposefully, rationally, and actively act under the normative values of Sustainable Development and gender equality. The latter presents an

argument that, by proposing youth to partake in formal modes of advocacy and citizenship, often referred to as youth-led accountability, a young 'agent of change' is obliged to follow certain actions towards development actors' palatable idea of how social change may happen. This chapter presents illustrative quotes from selected sources (from the narrative analysis) and data collected in the NGO interviews, juxtaposed with critical theoretical analysis in light of how the examples uphold its particular component of the 'youth as agent of change'.

GAGE provides another international-level actor's conceptualisation of youth. GAGE's evidence on youth attributes finds limited knowledge about adolescents with multiple marginalities, and failure to recognise a diversity of adolescent experiences and how they can be included in policy approaches. It is for such reasons this thesis addresses GAGE's thematic gaps in Bangladesh by studying a lesser-researched demographic in their study, that of affluent urban young people in Dhaka.

Following these findings are the Bangladeshi youth views on youth themselves and will answer RQ 1 in this chapter. These findings are the result of analysis from the Bangladeshi youth study, made up of interviews, image prompts, and a 14-day diary activity. This chapter includes youth views on what constitutes 'agents of change', 'changemakers', and citizenship. 'Agents of change' and 'changemakers' are attributes of young people, thought to be leaders in the pursuit of tangible social change. Young citizens are people who are motivated to seek change, influencing politics, and are guided by 'progressive morals' and knowledge about rights.

This chapter will explore how the participants perceive themselves in relation to the wider Bangladeshi community to be inherently more progressive due to their younger age, urban status, educatedness, and access to the global internet community. The participants appear to set up a cultural divide between online global discussions and social issues – predominantly occupied by middle-class, urban young people – and that of traditional, Bangladeshi cultural norms – predominantly occupied by older generations or rural people of all ages. These views are founded in themes of modernity, class privilege, and Western ethnocentrism which are highly complementary to white, liberal feminist imaginations of the 'global south' that are also employed in the 'youth as agents of change' model.

The way that young people navigate their relationships with their parents and parental expectations are a manifestation of these attitudes. This chapter includes how the participants make active and strategic choices and compromises in how they present themselves to their parents (and the wider community of elders) or make decisions within the confines of parental expectations. This analysis is framed by the analytical lens for the heterogenous ways youth may enact their own gender equality

visions, under prevailing gender equality norms (i.e. of the SDG era) (fully discussed in section 2.9 ('Understanding youth agency to enact change under prevailing gender equality norms')). This was insightful in identifying participants' agency in navigating parental relationships: the participants are simultaneously navigating a constrained environment (in their parents' home) whilst adapting their own gender equality norms to shift their parents' values and behaviours.

Bringing together these multiple attributes of youth in this chapter – from across the 'youth as agents of change model', to GAGE, and to Bangladeshi young people – similarities and differences will be explored, answering RQ 1. This chapter argues international actors are embedded in the politics of the SDGs, in which youth are based on racialised justifications for their role in gender norm change. Development actors operate a simplistic fantasy of youth roles in the SDGs, in which they hold grandiose assumptions of youth agency based on altruism and public-facing leadership. From my analysis of Bangladeshi youth, local-level realities are different. (Yet, they too think of youth as heroic archetypes and leaders for social change.) The participants do not engage in formal youth advocacy and accountability programming themselves. The participants are motivated to pursue social change for various reasons, reflected in the small-scale of their agentic actions: because it is the right thing to do, often in light of their personal experiences; because they have learnt that, upon gaining knowledge about these issues, they should share this knowledge; and that they should share their progressive values in contention with traditional norms.

3.2 The 'youth as agents of change' model: Youth homogenised as altruistic

Based on the findings of the narrative analysis and the NGO interviews, this chapter presents my original visualisation of the process that encompasses the expectations awarded to youth and how change happens: 'youth as agents of change' model (shown in Figure 6 below) that is discussed in section 1.11.1 ('The 'youth as agents of change' model'). It is the first of three empirical chapters to utilise the model as a means to demonstrate the development actor assumptions built into the process in which youth are imagined enacting change. This chapter will present two components of this process, 1) youth homogenised as altruistic and 2) normative role for youth engagement with politics (with the other two components, gender inequality lies in interpersonal norms and assumptions of youth agency and empowerment found in sections 4.2 ('Gender inequality lies in interpersonal norms') and 5.2 ('Assumptions of youth agency and empowerment') respectively). This is insightful for exploring international-level understandings of how youth are imagined and thereby

contributes to answering RQ 1 (Why do attributes of youth align and misalign across international and local levels?).

22 source materials in the narrative analysis referred to the nature of ‘youth’. The following section outlines my analysis of the ways youth populations are homogenised by development actors to be inherently altruistic and ‘progressive’ in their politics and decision-making, as well as natural leaders. Such characteristics are aligned with white, liberal feminist imaginations of femininities in the ‘global south’.

Youth are considered a social category that is situated in a transitional and relational period (ActionAid, 2019) in which development interventions of “soft skills, self-awareness and identity... are linked with better educational outcomes, jobs and incomes” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and ActionAid, 2015, p.2). This is likely due to an assumption that the pathways of people’s lives are determined during this ‘transitional’ period, maximising the output of the intervention. This logic in the ‘youth as agents of change’ model plays out as an assumption they will make purposeful decisions to pursue social change and claim their rights, as shown below in Figure 6. Points A and B signify the idealised actions of what youth do based on their altruistic nature: holding decision-makers to account (Point A) and spreading knowledge of social issues and rights to peers (Point B).

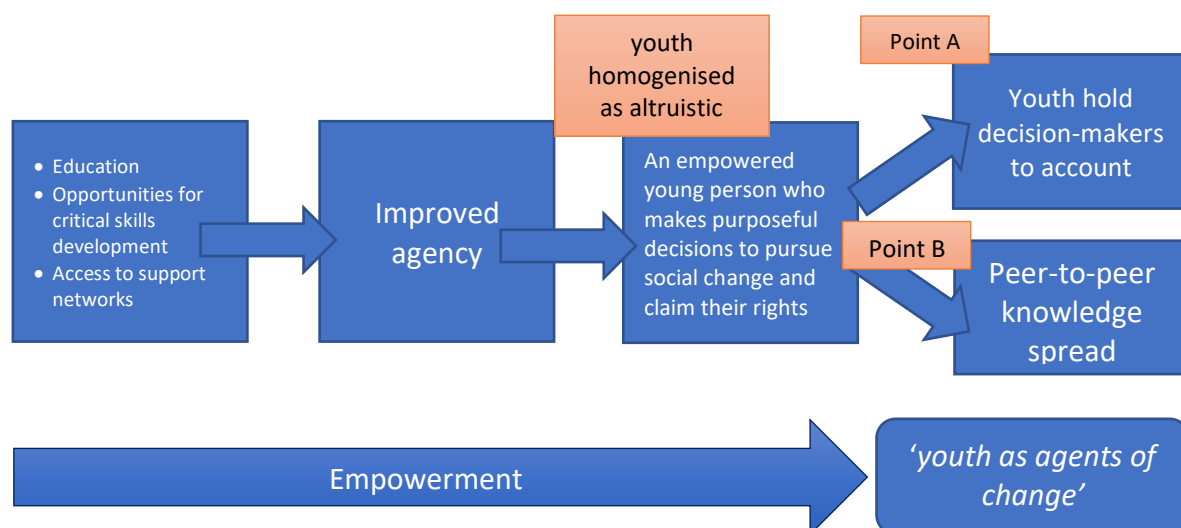


Figure 6: The ‘youth as agents of change’ model (author’s own)

Youth are framed as a foundational force for good by DFID (2015), ActionAid and OECD (2015) and are thereby instrumentalised to pursue actions outlined in Points A and B. DFID (2015) argues that, when engaged in development interventions, youth are a force for positive change and changers of social norms. Such interventions not only 'help' young people in their transition to adulthood but can support youth to 'advocate' for change in the world around them, according to DFID (2015). Similarly, UN Women (2014) situate young people as the future, wherein they are framed as inheriting past legacies and as leaders of tomorrow to 'shape the world'.

Young people are seen as being, or in want of being, natural leaders. Youth are often referred to as potential 'leaders' in development or that exhibiting 'leadership' will strengthen development and governance processes, based on the idea that it ensures the most marginalised – who 'hold the most expertise' – are at the centre of solutions (ATHENA International, 2018). ActionAid (2019) considers leadership to go beyond participation, and that youth innovation and educatedness place youth as best-equipped leaders for social issues. Youth leadership is framed as involving social impact, a platform to use voice, and influencing policy change and campaign for women's rights and gender justice at national, regional and international levels (Girl Up, Rise Up, 2019; Womankind International, 2017). In this way, they are seen as inherently capable of causing altruistic change; evidence of Choonara's et al. (2018) argument that young people's politics are often homogenised as inherently 'progressive' or more gender-equal than the preceding generation. This disguises youth elites who benefit from generational wealth, as well as other indicators of power imbalance, privilege, or oppression. These organisations pursue a liberalised form of identity politics, which imagines the global youth population in such a way as to justify orientating their programming towards youth-led policies.

This justification believes young people only pursue positive, agentic actions (Chant, 2016a; Desai, 2016): they purposefully, rationally, and actively act under the normative values of Sustainable Development and gender equality. The global youth population have therefore been framed using a positive agentic discourse that piles the burden of social change on their shoulders through providing emphasis on a kind of 'active citizenship' e.g. data collection towards advocacy efforts and youth leadership, demonstrated at the end of the 'youth as agents of change' model in Point A, Figure 6. 'Active citizenship' is based on suppositions of young people as natural leaders, actors in peer-to-peer roles, or innovators in data collection and social accountability; all of which are based on an elitist and liberalist vision of youth. This further demonstrates a disconnect with the realities of many in the

global youth population. The assumption for young people – particularly of the ‘global south’ – to be ‘agents of change’ is, in actuality, an essentialism that is suited to maintain cost-efficient development programming, in line with the logic of ‘smart economics’ (Berik, 2017). This follows the white, liberal feminism imaginations of ‘global south’ girlhoods who are coded as risk-averse and compassionate (Cornwall, 2014), and thereby thought to reap highly favourable returns as leaders.

From the narrative analysis findings, youth are also considered ‘changemakers’, related to the way an individual young person can ‘become’ or ‘demand’ the kind of change they want (Oxfam, 2016; UN Women, 2014). ‘Changemakers’ is applied to the informal sphere, in which it is about activists without platforms and people who do non-formal actions “living your beliefs and raising your voice” (UN Women, 2014, p.75). This is exemplified in Point B, Figure 6 as ‘peer-to-peer knowledge spread’, an outcome at the end of the ‘youth as agents of change’ model.

The language of the changemaker is also evidenced in the youth-centric NGO interviews. Actor A considers every child to be a ‘changemaker’ in that they are able to – and encouraged to – play a role in making change. Actor A interventions are based on creating opportunities to ‘utilise’ the potential of women and girls and to recognise women and girls’ leadership. Actor B’s overall target is 15–35-year-olds, based on the National Youth Policy of Bangladesh which states young people are between the ages of 15-35. The interviewee expressed that ‘agents of change’ is a term they frequently use in their narrative of young people, in which young people must be ‘empowered’ to be changemakers. Actor B’s Theory of Change is based on ‘promoting capabilities and skills [of young people] to be changemakers themselves. Young people are involved in Actor B through their formal leadership structures (e.g. their executive group) and as data collectors in their research that inputs into their programming, this is certainly complementary to both Points A and B in Figure 6.

Actor A and Actor B both, directly and indirectly, speak to the rhetoric of ‘maximising’ the ‘potential’ of young people (specifically young women and girls). Though there is no specific definition of potential, it can be inferred as the ability to fulfil the organisation’s training of actively pursuing gender equality. It is a mode of thinking that intends to recognise there is a (civic) role for young people in the process of societal change. Both organisations consider their participants to require specific inputs (i.e. knowledge) to reach this ‘potential’. The structural factors that would limit one’s agency are not as prioritised in the endeavour of ‘maximising potential’, aligning with the white, liberal feminist imaginations of smart economics. Young people are overburdened and overestimated in their capacity to enact change, a seemingly-gender neutral continuation of how ‘global south’ womanhoods have

been mobilised under historical gender and development paradigms as the locus of gender equality through the development of their individual capabilities. This is seemingly gender-neutral because the frameworks that imagine youth remain feminine-coded (under colonial binarized logic).

This sample of international actors frames youth as altruistic to justify their inclusion in a pathway wherein they would receive training on 'gender issues' and then follow through with advocacy actions (Point A, Figure 6) or peer-to-peer knowledge sharing (Point B, Figure 6). This homogenises how they may behave where, for example, an ideal 'agent of change' would naturally react positively to learning about gender and want to affect change. Whether as 'agents of change' or as 'changemakers', the everyday actions or 'active citizenship' of the supposedly empowered individual are thereby spectacularised and considered saviouristic, under the pedantic gaze of white, liberal feminisms (Desai, 2016).

3.3 The 'youth as agents of change' model: A normative role for youth engagement with politics

Key to the actions of being an 'agent of change', as presented in my visualisation of the 'youth as agents of change model', is youth holding decision-makers to account as to claim their rights (Figure 6, below). This is based upon a normative role that is dictated for youth engagement with politics and rights, as found in the narrative analysis and NGO interviews. This theme is a pertinent lens with which to analyse how youth are attributed in the SDG era, as it is based on specific characteristics and capabilities of youth to engage with politics in certain ways as explained in this section.

In the materials for analysis, 10 spoke to youth as 'data collectors' or 'researchers', 25 materials spoke to youth leaders/leadership or 'youth-led' actions and policy, and 31 materials related to terms around voice, activism, advocacy, and accountability. From my analysis youth are urged to partake in formal modes of advocacy and active citizenship, often referred to as youth-led accountability. This section presents an argument that a young 'agent of change' is obliged to follow certain actions towards development actors' palatable idea of how social change may happen.

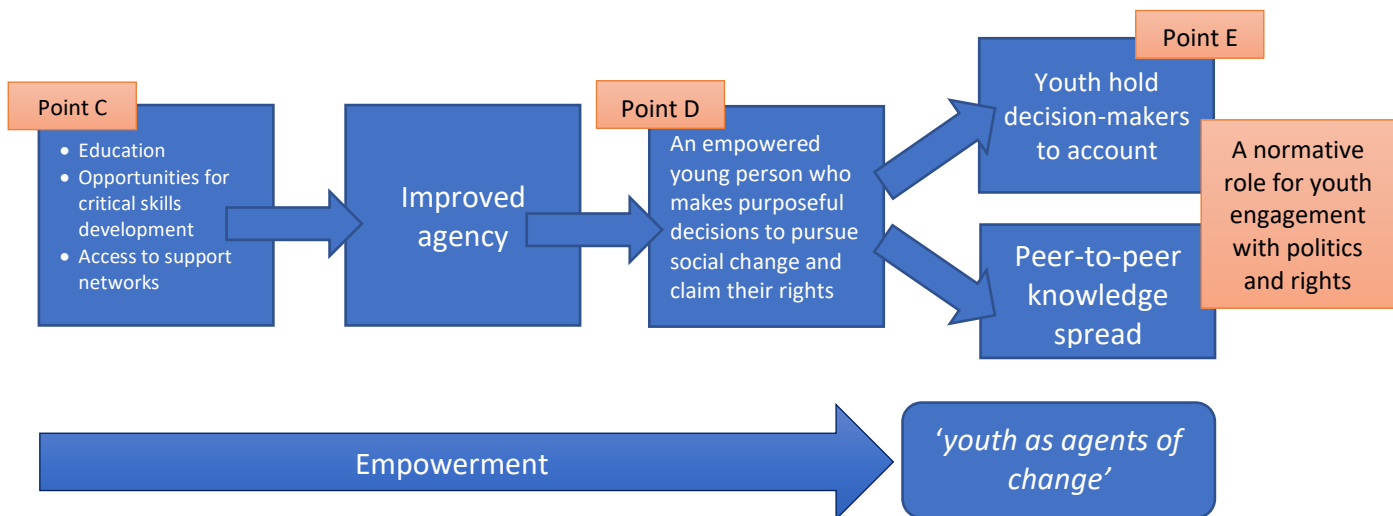


Figure 6: The 'youth as agents of change' model (author's own)

A pivotal role is given to youth-led accountability (or youth-led advocacy) in much development actor policy. For example, both IPPF (2016) and Plan International (and Asian Development Bank) (2019) frame youth-led accountability as a pathway to ensure legal and political "promises are delivered, norms are challenged and the best outcomes achieved" (ibid, p.41) and ultimately improved governance – all of which is led by young people. Youth are given 'technical training' in areas of data collection and analysis, network building, advocacy and communications to be 'effective' to hold decision-makers to account (ActionAid, 2019; Restless Development and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), n.d.). In this way, youth are sought to be given inputs (Point C, Figure 6) to improve their agency to enact these accountability actions. Represented as both Points D and E, young people's access to participate in review processes, and opportunities to hold dialogues with decision-makers are framed as 'empowering activities for youth' (Restless Development and UNFPA, n.d.); inputs that are facilitated by many development actors. Accountability is both a process in itself and an outcome predicated on an assumption of the will and capabilities of young people to be involved. World Association of Girls Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) (2018) argues youth should be surrounded by an enabling environment of 'youth supporting organisations' in which they may partake in networking and mentoring to benefit from diverse networks of partners in accountability efforts. It notes young people should develop skills for using media to collect data and evidence.

Though not explicitly self-defined as youth-led accountability campaigns, the three interviewees all noted programming around youth-led advocacy campaigns:

- Actor A supports peer-to-peer-led awareness raising, which is represented at Point C of Figure 6, in which young people spread information so their communities are better able to seek

legal help. Community- or student-watch groups are set up by Actor A to be 'changemakers' or 'activists' who act to access rights and information on behalf of their community. For example, "if an incident happens in the community like rape etc., they will work with local representatives or law enforcement or [Actor A] support". These 'changemakers' take the first action in response to and reporting such incidents. They provide support to victims which acts to minimise the shame experienced by victims and their families. Actor A provides these groups with weekly training and orientations; they "discuss specific topics like dowry, child marriage, pregnancy, women's rights, what is considered violence".

- One of Actor B's 'pillars' in their work is 'reaching the root', whereby they train a cohort of young people to be gender equality activists who can in turn try to change their communities by spreading their new knowledge. Point C through to Point E is embedded in this theory of change shown in Figure 6 (above) – Point C being the assumed inputs (education, opportunities for critical skills development, access to support networks); Point D as to young people that are 'empowered', which means they can make purposeful decisions to pursue social change and 'claim' the rights they may be denied; and Point E as 'claiming' rights by ways of peer-to-peer knowledge spread of rights and social issues and holding decisionmakers to account to uphold rights. 15–25-year-olds across 15 schools and madrasas are given training on gender issues including sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence, as well as campaign and advocacy designing. These young people (that are 50/50 male and female) plan and pursue their own advocacy campaigns in accordance with their own needs.
- Actor C's 3-year programme provides spaces, across the UK, for training and support of girls aged 13-16 to become advocates for gender equality by developing their own campaigns based on what they are passionate about. The programme brings together girls 'with low well-being' in safe spaces to learn about the issues facing young people in their communities and to be able to discuss such issues and then plan and deliver their own 'social action project'. The training curriculum is delivered by local youth workers and covers various social learning topics around gender and identity, such as body image, women in sports, women's refugee rights, LGBTQ+ issues, etc. Throughout the training, participants are supported to develop their own campaigns. These campaigns serve to teach participants that "they could be [and do] anything" because the "project is about through this journey of learning and ability to identify themselves within them the longer struggle of women's rights".

These examples of 'youth-led campaigns' intend not only to deliver wider social change through the influence of the young people's advocacy but hold the goal in itself to improve the young people's

understanding of their experiences in their gender identity. This is particularly of importance to Actor C, which monitors the well-being and satisfaction of the participants themselves, rather than the impacts of their 'social action projects'. The 'social action projects' seek not to have tangible impacts on gender equality etc. but serve to be an experience for the young people to improve their confidence and engage in their communities.

According to Actor A and Actor B, change towards gender equality is initiated through peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and the community awareness-raising efforts of their participants. These organisations certainly hold values represented by the 'youth as agents of change' model. Actor B specifically refers to it as the 'trickle-down' of knowledge, in which training a cohort of young people will in turn disseminate to more and more people as time goes on. In this process there is, perhaps, an overestimation of the capacity for one (young) person to influence another, who would influence another, and so on. This is not to say the concept of spreading knowledge of one's rights or systematic inequalities is problematic, but that there is an overemphasis of young people's capabilities to initiate social change. This differs from the way that Actor C's 'social action projects' serve to benefit the young people themselves more than their communities.

Across the source materials of the narrative analysis, 'change' is initiated by a process in which young people are given training that outlines contestable ideas (gender, gender equality, healthy masculinities etc) and how to deliver campaigns. This seeks to equip the participants with the capability to enact campaigns / 'advocacy actions' in light of their own interests or to respond to community needs.

In the narrative analysis, 31 source materials referred to ideas around citizenship and rights. It is these kinds of rights which are sought to be claimed in Point D, Figure 6. Youth participation in NGO programming – e.g. as advisors and representatives – is in itself made out to be a normative pathway towards the fulfilment of a myriad of youth rights, justice for young people, and a manner in which young people can enact their rights as citizens. Across the sample, 'active citizenship' is an often-used phrase, which includes youth making a contribution to their communities, transforming their circumstances, and contributing towards SDG monitoring and holding governments to account (Plan International and Asian Development Bank, 2019). 'Youth as agents of change' is a label for youth to be 'recognised' or 'appreciated' as pivotal to social change by other actors (OECD and ActionAid, 2015; The Coalition for Adolescent Girls, 2015). In other words, there is a line of thinking by these

organisations in which calling youth ‘agents of change’ is a way to legitimise the role of youth in enacting change.

‘Youth as agents of change’ promotes a normative kind of advocacy and active citizenship for young people to enact on through formalised channels of social accountability, which encompasses one of the two final pathways of the ‘youth as agents of change’ model shown as Point E in Figure 6. Unpacking this role in social accountability, much of it is framed as ‘data-driven’: young people are presumed to collect more accurate data (ActionAid, 2019; Restless Development and UNFPA, n.d.). This is likely due to an assumption of youth-centric innovations in research through using social media and technology, arts-based practices and existing networks e.g. social clubs, groups and movements (Development Alternative, 2019). There is also an idea here that youth have specific tendencies to be natural researchers or data-driven innovators; an assumption that is perhaps based on the interests of the more elite youth.

Young people may be given a ‘seat at the table’ to claim their rights and hold decision-makers to account but must conform to the terms of the debate (Berenstain, 2016). In the case of these development actors, the terms of the debate are white, liberal feminist epistemologies which entrench young people into the politics of liberalism and inclusion. The façade of inclusion of young people to be ‘agents of change’ serves to control or absorb dissent (Arvin et al., 2013) and communicate the message of the SDGs. Political change led by young people is sought to follow respectability and palatability, and resistance is framed, funded, and controlled by NGOs and other aid organisations (O’Malley and Johnson, 2018). ‘Youth as agents of change’ is a strategic tool for development actors to import their norms into communities of young people who are ‘trained’ to live out these ideals.

In the SDG era, ‘youth as agents of change’ stems from the intention to position youth as actors and institutionally recognised partners in the development process, rather than as ‘recipients’. This speaks to bottom-up development thinking around recognising the agency of people that are normatively ‘regarded as ‘passive beneficiaries’ (Green, 2000). However, this turn to deconstructing the legacies of development relations falls flat in the face of a system of norms (the SDG framework, and development actors in the SDG era) that fails to be transformative: the focus on interpersonal domains, a failure to recognise macro-gender transgressions, cultural pluralities, and challenges to capitalism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity. There is an assumption that the young ‘agents of change’ are already empowered at the level of consciousness, and only require intervention that

supports their social and political action (Green, 2000) (Point C). Alternatively, ‘beneficiaries’ may only be empowered through their engagement with bringing about change, rather than experiencing the change themselves (Kamruzzaman, 2020), visualised as Point D.

By specifically calling upon youth to partake in formal modes of advocacy, it erases the possibility of youth to be ‘agents of change’ or changemakers through dissonance or disrupting the *rules of the game*, in favour of having a seat at the table. ‘Youth as agents of change’ is, as shown in this discourse, a normative kind of advocacy for young people to enact on through formalised channels of social accountability. It is the pursuit of the liberalised politics of inclusion which concerns having a seat at the table and communicating the message of the SDGs. These considerations, in conjunction with the findings of section 3.2, also follow the feminisation of the apparently gender-neutral ‘youth’ found in the SDG framework. Youth are coded as feminine for their altruistic ways – in line with histories of how white, liberal feminist imagination has framed womanhoods, spectacularised girlhoods, and problematised masculinities – to justify youths’ supposed will and capacity to partake in such actions.

3.4 GAGE’s evidence on youth attributes

GAGE's evidence on youth attributes also contributes to international-level ideas of how youth are framed, speaking to RQ 1 (Why do attributes of youth align and misalign across international and local levels?). Given GAGE is a research programme rather than an intervention programme, the imposition of norms is not a direct outcome like the ‘Western imports’ acknowledged in the literature review or many of the development actors in the narrative analysis. However, the aims and framings within GAGE are still imbued with distinct subjective constructs of youth.

GAGE provides another international-level actor's conceptualisation of youth and acknowledges the limited representation of youth in much development actor knowledge. GAGE is reflective of the terms of its commissioning agency and funding body, UK Aid (terms that are embedded in the ideology outlined in section 1.3.1 (‘The funding politics of GAGE’)). GAGE materials demonstrate the research programme gives much consideration to its place in engaging with global youth policy and practice. GAGE recognises how its conceptual framework and methodology bridge existing knowledge and conceptual gaps in development that often undermine youth-targeted interventions. Gaps acknowledged by GAGE’s Special Issue in *The European Journal of Development Research* include a lack of consistent operationalisation of ‘adolescence’ within development programming, limited knowledge about adolescents with multiple marginalities, and failure to recognise a diversity of

adolescent experiences and how they can be included in policy approaches. Given these acknowledged gaps, GAGE proposes its place and purpose in development policy and practice by providing a more nuanced and contextually located understanding of youth capabilities and the vulnerabilities they face, especially given that socially marginalised adolescents are often invisible in longitudinal and cross-sectional studies (Baird et al., 2021b), like Demographic and Health Surveys or SDG monitoring.

The main comparative point between my thesis and GAGE's research in Bangladesh is the demographic characteristics of the participants involved in the study, who represent urban affluent youth in Dhaka that attend an English Medium School. Though many young people across Bangladesh have access to a mobile phone, the participants in this study represent a small population of young people who have their own personal phones, Wi-Fi at home, and phone signal in the areas they visit outside of the home. This was apparent in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic, where the participants were able to make use of their idle time at home through the internet. This contrasted with the realities of young people without such access (Huq et al., 2020). Where participants in this study referred to various celebrities as role models (acknowledged in the section below), the finding of Alam et al. (2019b) found their participants are mostly influenced by parents and teachers, possibly indicating the influence of broader (global) popular culture on this thesis' participants.

This thesis shows one side of the digital divide that was highlighted in GAGE research of the literature review (Huq et al., 2020) – not one of gender differences, but between higher socio-economic classes in urban areas and lower socio-economic classes in rural areas. Young people facing such contexts during the height of the Covid-19 Pandemic would likely have had largely differing agentic actions in pursuit of their own ideas of 'gender equality' to the participants of this study.

GAGE materials demonstrate how its research has fostered conditions for youth "to expand their capabilities now and in the future" (Baird et al., 2021a, p.1182). Work to do so has included "the active involvement of GAGE in the Adolescent Girls Investment Plan collective, and in work with various governments and stakeholders to ensure findings have uptake and impact" (ibid, p.1182), such as co-developing research tools. GAGE sees its place in development policy and practice as reorienting traditional research methods to understand the heterogeneity and nuance of adolescence so that it can inform policy and programmatic intervention to be aptly responsive. For example, GAGE research on Rohingya girls attributes the reproduction of gender norms around child marriage to 'doxa'

(Guglielmi et al., 2021b). As an international actor, GAGE presents a complex interrogating lens onto youth lives, structures and agency.

3.5 Bangladeshi youth views: 'Agents of change' and 'Changemakers'

This section comprises my analysis of the interviews with Bangladeshi youth, particularly how they outlined views of 'agents of change' and 'changemakers'. This is insightful for exploring local-level understandings of how youth are imagined and thereby contributes to answering RQ 1 (Why do attributes of youth align and misalign across international and local levels?).

All participants were familiar with the term 'agents of change'. Through their discussions, their knowledge of the term is likely due to their activism/feminist clubs and social media. When asked about their feeling about the term 'agents of change', some felt a need to create a distinction between an 'agent of change' and 'changemaker'. These participants noted the distinction as follows:

- 'Agent of change': chains of young people who tell a few people about social values, who then each tell a few more people and so on (Saima, Faisal, Yusuf)
- 'Changemaker': more extreme (Saima), change a big group at once, more active in pursuit of change, think outside the box for problem-solving (Yusuf), good leaders (Faisal)

The participants' definitions of 'agent of change' versus 'changemaker' is oppositional to that found in the narrative analysis. In the narrative analysis, 'changemakers' enact informal actions towards social change, and relate to the individual level change, like peer-to-peer knowledge spread. This demonstrates how norms around 'change agents' are not only top-down but exist and are translated interdependently between human agents. Given there is no set definition for these terms, and they are used interchangeably across media and in educational setups, there is no way to find the origin of the distinctions.

There was a sentiment that 'agents of change' and 'changemakers' are attributes of young people. Saima explains that young people's determination and headstrong nature means that young people are more likely to be changemakers. She points to Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai as prime examples of changemakers who are "stubborn in a good way" to pursue positive change. Asif also brought up Greta Thunberg in reference to 'agents of change': "not only did she show that young people could make an impact, she stated how important it was for our generation to take point on

the issues in the world”. Similarly, Protik relayed the importance that youth should be heard and given the floor.



Figure 8: Participants' aggregate responses to defining 'agents of change', visualised as a word cloud

Figure 8 is a word cloud that I produced using an online word cloud generator, in which I inputted text of participants' aggregate responses to defining 'agents of change' (using the mind-mapping exercise outlined in section 1.5.4.3 ('Research methods')). The word cloud is valuable to demonstrate the most popular terms used in reference to 'agents of change' and the relative frequency with which the same terms are used across participants (visualised in size). In this semantic field, prominence is given to 'change' and 'leader/leadership'. They believe 'an agent of change'/'changemaker' is public-facing and has leadership qualities, as to "make a lot of noise" (Rumena) about discrimination and to gather people towards the cause as a collective. Radhika notes that 'an agent of change' can be anyone, including allies, to make sure everybody stands up for the victims. These attributes are complementary to the ways that young people are constructed to be altruistic leaders by development actors and also contribute toward the homogenisation of youth politics to be inherently progressive and saviouristic.

From the participants, 'agents of change' and 'changemakers' are thought to be resourceful and problem-solving in the pursuit of social change. They seek to spread awareness by influencing and changing mindsets and creating interpersonal change. They are selfless, and are passionate about pursuing change for the sake of change, not for selfish reasons, as explained by Protik:

“To solve a social problem he or she will have empathy, thoughtfulness. He will take action, collaborate, show leadership, and ...he will be very supportive, and, you know, he will have connections, he will have networks.”

Protik, who considers himself an ‘agent of change’ believes he is so because “I try to change things... change peoples’ views... [and an] empowered person [should] raise their voice against discrimination”. On considering themselves as ‘agents of change’, participants were mixed. This was based upon the extent to which they think spreading awareness online counts as actions an ‘agent of change’ would do. Faisal notes that school is “the best place” to start to be an ‘agent of change’ to inspire peers, which is what he is trying to do before broadening his reach, he went on to say:

“I feel sort of conflicted about [calling myself an agent of change] because I do have leadership qualities. And whenever I get the opportunity, I try to lead as much as possible. But as an agent of change, I’m not sure about that one”.

Though participants pursue the kinds of social actions that they associate with ‘agents of change’, some felt that they couldn’t call themselves an ‘agent of change’, given they had not created a tangible social change as public-facing leaders. Moreover, participants felt mixed when presented with the statement: “I feel like there is too much pressure on me to think about my future and how I can create change”. While some participants recognised a well-placed responsibility to pursue social change and craft their futures, other participants felt such a burden was undue in their lives.

The research showed a dichotomy between the young peoples’ construction of ‘youths as agents of change’ – based on their imagination of a headstrong, outspoken political figure and the young people’s real lives. There are multiple ways this can be explained. For some participants, the ‘agent of change’/changemaker is such an unrealistically, highly achieved figure, that they cannot see themselves as occupying this role. This is an interesting point when in relation to the Likert scale result that showed the participants feel mixed on whether youth feel able to engage with current affairs. Alternatively, the ‘agent of change’ role is achievable – through spreading knowledge in their social networks – but the participants feel they simply do not engage in such actions. Some participants did think of themselves as ‘agents of change’, particularly due to their ‘awareness-raising’ activities online.

Regardless of whether participants see themselves as ‘agents of change’, the young people partake in the popular rhetoric of ‘agents of change’ which assumes youth to be inherently altruistic and natural

leaders. Youth are aligned with white, liberal feminist politics of progressiveness. The participants speak to a positive agentic discourse that emphasises ‘active citizenship’. Their ideas align with a figure based upon activists like Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai, who are more like celebrities than examples who can be easily followed by everyday youth.

3.6 Bangladeshi youth views: ‘Citizenship’

Here, I provide my analysis of the ways in which Bangladeshi youth view ‘citizenship’ and how this outlines their ideas of youth capabilities and roles in social change. The participants’ view of citizenship was similar to being an ‘agent of change’: young citizens are people who are motivated to seek change, influencing politics, and guided by ‘progressive morals’ and knowledge about rights. In this way, ‘agents of change’/‘changemaker discourse overlaps with citizenship, to dictate the individualist politics of pursuing social change. It is likely their ideas about citizenship originated out of their personal interest in activism. In the sample, there was less emphasis on citizenship as an entitlement to state protection or normative actions of voting.

Radhika notably said citizens are "more educated than previous generations [and] engaged with the outside world than what is taught in school". In the word cloud below, produced using an online word cloud generator, I inputted text of participants' aggregate responses to defining 'citizenship' (using the mind-mapping exercise outlined in section 1.5.4.3 ('Research methods')).

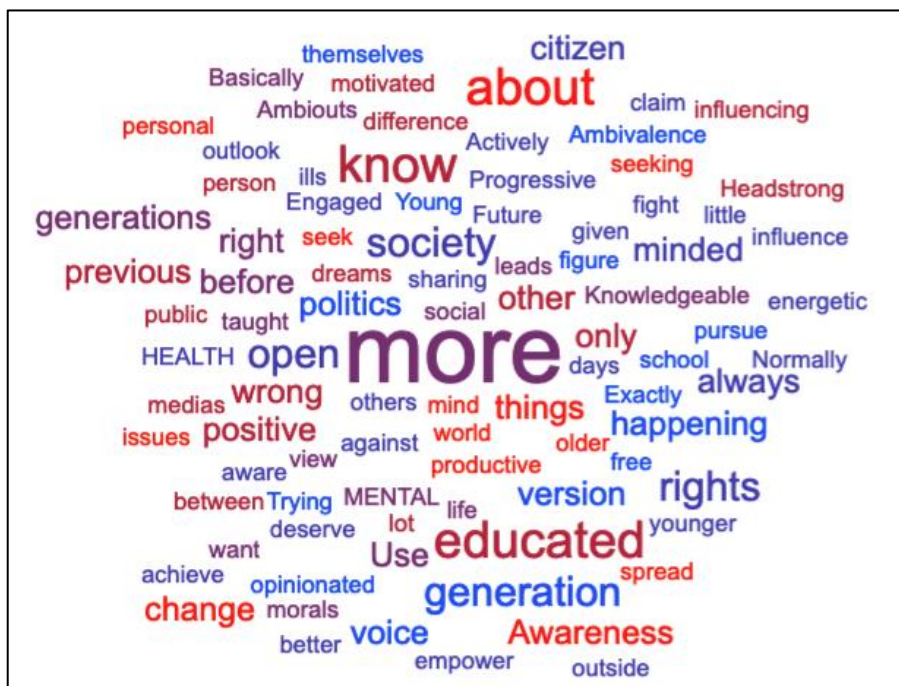


Figure 9: Participants’ aggregate responses to defining ‘Citizenship’, visualized as a word cloud

The word cloud is insightful to visualise the most popular terms used in reference to 'citizenship' and the relative frequency with which the same terms are used across participants (visualised in size). In this semantic field, prominence is given to knowledgeability and awareness of social issues. Again, young people valorise an archetypal young figure who is active and knowledgeable about issues. This is akin to the language of 'active citizenship' deployed by development actors; based on an elitist and liberalist vision of youth to want to transform their communities and to be natural leaders, actors in peer-to-peer roles, or innovators in data collection and social accountability.

Most participants had an ambivalence about calling themselves citizens, given their little to no influence on politics, except for sharing current affairs on their personal social media profiles. A young citizen is given credence as they are more energetic than older generations and are believed to be more aware of inequalities and able to address such issues. In this description of a young citizen, Protik plays into a cultural dichotomy between young people and older generations:

"Basically, they're like a better version. They're like, they're like a version, which is like very educated. They're very educated normally these days. They're more educated than previous generations, and they know what's right and wrong. Exactly. The difference between right and wrong".

Youth ideas around their citizenship give light to the ways that young populations who hold certain progressive views hold themselves in opposition to other demographics that are not as socially conscious.

Regarding a more 'global citizenship' role, the participants were limited to the extent to which they engaged in discourses around globalism and being a part of the international community. The Covid-19 Pandemic led to the participants acknowledging they have a global-level responsibility as individuals in stopping the virus. This was a similar sentiment they held in light of the Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate movements. Yet, they believed their roles in such movements, and in the pandemic, were to serve efforts in their own community, as opposed to feeling like ambassadors for the outside world. This is not a value statement but to note that young people filter down norms and translate them for their communities, but there is little to show for these young people feeling a need to translate these upwards at a more international level. More can be shown about the participants' relationship with the international community and UN-type spaces, in that there was uncertainty

shared by the participants over the extent to which 'a global agenda to gender equality is helpful in achieving it in my community'.

The participants' civic role in informal (online) activism notably differs in comparison to the analysis explored in section 3.3 ('A normative role for youth engagement with politics') which emphasises *playing the rules of the game* through social action projects, youth-led advocacy or accountability programming.

3.7 "The problem with people here...": Bangladeshi youths' views on their social and political values

Central to how the Bangladeshi young participants construct themselves and their role in society is how, and why, they differentiate themselves from others in Bangladesh. Across all research activities with Bangladeshi youth, all participants refer to a cultural divide of sorts: between online 'global' discussions and social issues – predominantly occupied by middle-class, urban young people – and that of perceived 'traditional', Bangladeshi cultural norms – predominantly occupied by older generations or rural people of all ages. An example of this dichotomy is how participants related their belief in LGBTQ+ rights with their educatedness and online presence and contrasted this with sections of the Bangladeshi population who are religious and were educated in Bangla medium schools.

Yusuf believed 'young people are more open and willing to [pursue social] change' than older generations. Among all participants, they believed young people in Bangladesh are more engaged and knowledgeable about social inequalities than older generations. These knowledgeable social issues extend not only in Bangladesh but around the world – with particular references being made to Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate. All participants acknowledge that such a phenomenon has stemmed from social media, which is a platform that is considered by multiple participants to educate many urban middle-class Bangladeshi youth.

All participants pointed to the internet, particularly social media, as a gateway towards progressive viewpoints and a source of education on social issues, such as Black Lives Matter. Radhika says she is happy that, owing to the internet "that people these days are promoting certain things and people are becoming more aware... many people are now supporting gender equality and feminism".

Radhika suggests that, as globalisation occurs and internet access increases, more people in Bangladesh will be able to learn about the world outside what they learn in school. She notes the fact that people are a circumstance of their time:

"When I was small, I did not have access to the internet like I have today. But my cousins, the ones who are like three or four [years old] need access to everything that I did not know at that age. And my parents, or people who are 20 years older than me, are more close-minded. And they are kind of not aware of the things happening in society. So 20 years ago, I guess I would not have these options that I have today. I guess I would just have to marry and live my life as a housewife. I guess that is the case for me if I were born 20 years ago."

Regarding the internet, despite being seen as a global platform with a "shared mentality [of progressive values]", much of the online content the participants consume is from Bangladesh and online-only friends are also from Bangladesh. And so, the international/local dichotomy is shown to be a falsehood, in which the norms the participants value as 'global' have also sprouted locally.

Further clarification from the participants was given about the 'older generations' in this divide. The participants spoke about how 'older generations' care too much about the importance of considering 'what other people will think'. This leads to, as explained by Radhika, people being too entangled in their own lives to worry about social problems. Alternatively, Rumena and Yusuf both suggest that a fear of being judged prevents many Bangladeshis from 'rocking the boat', advocating for justice, or acting outside of gender and social expectations. As Rumena concisely puts it: "It's taboo to talk about LGBTQ+ issues, so there will be no change". The Likert scale study asked: "What the community thinks of me and my family impacts how outspoken I am". All participants reacted as options in the middle of the scale (i.e. neither agree nor disagree, unsure, mildly agree), possibly due to both the fear and contempt of community judgment.

Frequent reference is made to "people's attitudes here", "people's mindsets", or people as "stubborn", referred to by Yusuf as an obstacle to social change. Participants have constructed a dichotomy between themselves and those who do not share their views, creating a cultural divide of mindsets around progressiveness. Multiple participants suggest that the pursuit of social change lies in changing the mindset of such groups of people and asking people "to let go of [certain] cultural

beliefs]”. Yusuf suggests a slightly aggressive approach, speaking to the effect that “change is going to happen whether they like it or not”. He went on to say:

“Well, I'd want them not to stick to their old ways, the old days are gone. I want them to think about what we're doing. Think about what we want to do and think about how we want the society to be and not how they want the society to be because things have changed, things will change. And there's a lot more to happen. And even if they don't like the changes, changes are gonna happen. They can't stop it. Yeah, even if they want to. So I'd like for them to stop thinking that the world will stay the same.”

Yusuf’s viewpoints are representative of responses from all participants; they believe that social change is inevitable as they get older and as the current older generation will eventually die out. Moreover, as their generation has their own children, they believe they will pass down their cultural norms to future generations, and so the cultural norms of older generations will no longer be popular. Along these lines, a Likert scale question found all participants agreed that they “have seen how expectations and roles change between the older generation to the younger generation”.

This cultural divide does not only exist along the lines of age but of rural/urban and class status too. Radhika spoke extensively about the difference in demographics of Bangla medium schools versus English medium schools. She says:

“So if you're talking about English medium schools, like from where I am, ... then yeah, 14-year-olds do have the progressive mindset. But if you're talking about Bangla medium schools, you know, they haven't had the media or like, the exposure that we have, so they might not be as open to it.”

She goes on to note that people who attend, or have attended, Bangla medium are less likely to speak English and equate this with their cultural values, using the example of being pro-life, which has caused a cultural division. People who have attended English medium schools are noted by Radhika to be likely to live and work abroad, leaving the Bangladeshi population to be mostly comprised of Bangla medium students. It is for this reason, Radhika suggests, that social change is slow in Bangladesh. These assumptions around Bangla and English medium education can be explained using Faust and Nagar's (2008) research on English medium education in India, in which education becomes a segregating tool for class privilege. English medium education shapes the terrain of how

development, democracy, and social change are achieved (ibid). In this way, Radhika exemplifies the class superiority imbued by English medium education. She plays into Western ethnocentrism, in which her Western values and way of thinking are equated with liberal progressive values, and these, in turn, are equated with globalisation. The participants' adoption of Western ethnocentric narratives around modernity and progressiveness can be explained using Sa'ar's (2005) 'liberal bargain': a consciousness adopted by marginalised populations in postcolonial contexts that internalises the liberal epistemology when benefitting from the power differentials imbued by class privilege.

Faisal, Protik and Asif also play into these Western ethnocentrisms, in which they expanded their respective explanations about the cultural divide using the example of NGO programmes they had each heard about. Asif says that people are "protective of their views or values on gender equality," and so a global agenda on gender equality can be difficult to achieve in some circumstances. Protik expands on the same topic, that young people may wish to change attitudes but experience pushback as their values are seen as part of a Western Christian agenda. Protik also noted the lack of awareness of the SDGs by a lot of people in the country and implied the SDGs are in contention with many Bangladeshis' views.

The participants play into Second Wave, Western feminist ideas that liberal political ideologies emerge out of modernity (Allen, 2013). They imply that their social values are ahead of rural and/older demographics in Bangladesh, in light of their 'traditional' values. The participants cater to a conception of modernity as an endpoint that non-Western people move towards, as opposed to an amalgam of plural and dynamic cultural systems which are multidirectional (Bhambra, 2007).

Their conceptualisation of the internet is that of a terrain which is global and progressive. Much of the participants' social media and internet content they consume is in the English language – regardless of whether the contents' origin is in Bangladesh – and so norms they receive from the internet are codified as global as opposed to local/traditional (Narayanaswamy, 2019). The proliferation of gender equality norms and ideas of social progress is given legitimacy in being communicated through the internet (ibid). For example, participants' relationship with popular culture comes from celebrities, films, and music that they see on the internet. Without influence from myself, Radhika and Rumena both gave examples of various famous American people who are outspoken in their feminist beliefs and subversive gender performances. The participants all relate Western culture with liberal, progressive values which are celebrated in internet culture. This oversimplifies the nature of the internet and social media, as a platform that is equally imbued with right-wing and religiously

conservative materials. Moreover, a lot of the young people's most frequented social media websites and YouTube channels originated in Bangladesh. This shows that their values which they deem as more 'global', may stem from their own country.

Rumena spoke about how middle-class urban Bangladeshis are following the global trend of gender reveal parties, wherein an unborn baby's biological sex is revealed as either a boy or a girl. According to Rumena, the popularisation of gender reveal parties in Bangladesh was spread on the internet, as an American concept. The new, supposedly 'globalised' and Western gender norms are still forms of heteropatriarchal oppression. These parties can be problematised given they reinforce a biologically determined male-female gender binary, thereby erasing transgender, non-binary, or intersex identification. This example muddies the participants' construction of a cultural divide between 'gender-progressive' urban young people and 'traditionalist' older, rural populations. Again, global and local divide is subverted, because a celebrated norm that has travelled internationally (i.e. gender reveal parties) is deeply heteronormative.

In bringing up cultural divides around social and gender norms, the participants speak to themes of modernity, class privilege, and Western ethnocentrism. Together, these themes suggest participants view their social values as justification for their role in imbuing social change because they believe they have the correct values to lead change. It is in this way that, for these specific young people, the attributes of youth *that matter* in pursuing gender equality in the SDG era are youth that adheres to such values. To compare with the international domains of the SDG era, the participants share the gender equality norms that perpetuate white normativity. Referring back to the Bangladeshi historical context (discussed in Section 2.9.5), the participants are replicating the politics of national feminist organisations in Bangladesh, by aligning with global feminisms in place of a class-based analysis. And so, these elite young people are reinforcing the global and local disjuncture in feminisms, outlined by Siddiqui (2009). In this way, the dichotomy is not global 'progressivism' versus local 'traditionalism', but of so-called global and national feminisms not meaningfully responding to the needs of local domains.

At the same time as holding their 'global, progressive' views, the participants are navigating two worlds: a mostly online world about transnational anti-racist and feminist movements; and an offline world of older community members opposed to such issues.

3.8 Bangladeshi youth agentic action: Navigating parental expectations and relationships

The ways in which these Bangladeshi youth see themselves are found in how they navigate parental expectations and relationships, further building response to the local level aspects of RQ 1 (Why do attributes of youth align and misalign across international and local levels?). The following section demonstrates how participants make active and strategic choices and compromises in how they present themselves to their parents (and the wider community of elders) or make decisions within the confines of parental expectations. This is an act of agency by young people, that is found under the proposed analytical lens to explore youth agency at the local level.

All Bangladeshi youth participants live under a duality: social media as a platform for sharing their social values and keeping these values quieter in their offline, family lives. Parental relationships were dictated by a generational cultural divide over the participants' personal political and social values and aspirations for society and parents' worry over what other people will think. All participants believed they could convince their parents to allow them to pursue extracurriculars not in the name of employment but for social good. Yusuf provided further clarification:

"I think it's very common for people to take part in charities and activism work just because they want it to be on their school profile which I find kind of sad... If I were such a person, then I would tell my parents that if they want a good employability profile for universities, then just take me to [sports], model UN, or Olympiads. Do not make me do activism if I'm not passionate about it".

All participants had some frustration with their parents' prioritisation of schoolwork over their well-being and passions for the future. Across the genders, participants expressed feeling pressured to pursue careers in STEM subjects. Saima provides further clarification: "parents have more expectations of me than a boy; older generations care about the status of being a doctor... there's lots of pressure but also want to be taken seriously". In contrast, Asif noted that his mother says she will support him in whatever field he chooses. There were discrepancies between girls' aspirations in comparison to boys' aspirations: girls' future career plans are more shaped, or face more pressure, than those of boys. From my analysis, girls feel more pressured about the future than boy participants and are less supported to pursue their ideal careers and interests by their parents. The boys appear to have more autonomy over their paths in life and their interests than girls. All youth would all rather prioritise happiness than their parents' expectations for their futures.

Some participants note their parents disagree with their personal gender equality values. Yusuf's parents believe that certain pursuits are masculine or feminine, which Yusuf contends with. Asif said that, though it hurts his mum has such opposing views about gender, he is comfortable debating this with her. Asif is intrigued by American teenagers who are more likely to talk back or retaliate with their elders, which he classed as oppositional to Bangladeshi culture. It is here that it is pertinent to note, in proposing navigating parental relationships as agentic practice, this is not to equate an aggressive confrontation with parents as agentic practice. Nor does this represent the inability of some young people to gently contend with parental expectations as lacking agency. Rather, in everyday life young people make micro-decisions in pursuit of their idealised social values, and these micro-decisions may be in contention with the norms, expectations, and values of their families and communities.

All interviewees expressed feeling undermined by older generations ("some people will never see me as anything other than a teenager" (Faisal)). Participants wished to be taken more seriously by adults when they speak their opinions as they feel somewhat not taken seriously enough by adults in their life and feel unsure about speaking their minds in their family home. Some participants speak about such issues with parents, others feel it is fruitless. They suggested that when they get older, they would be more open to listening to young people than their elders and hope generational divides would lessen. Protik, the oldest participant at 19, said that he has gained more trust than when he was a child, but still feels not taken seriously in the family home. He believes he cannot be too outspoken in his gender equality activism, fearing the community will approach his parents with negative consequences (which were unspecified).

Participants juggle parental expectations with the pursuit of their own interests (mostly in the online world) or aspirations for happiness. Participants can be themselves around their parents but, still, feel the pressure of pursuing careers. In a sense, participants live a double life of being children to their parents and then having their own values and interests with peers and online spaces.

The analytical lens to explore youth agency is pertinent here to consider how norms and structuration affect how the youths conduct themselves and experience their relationships. Agentic action in navigating parental relationships comes about as the participants are simultaneously navigating a constrained environment (in their parents' home) whilst adapting their own gender equality norms to shift their parents' values and behaviours. This aligns with the agency literature that recognises agency

as the capacity to improve one's own well-being and that of impacting the well-being of others and the structuring of society, inciting social change (Cleaver, 2003; Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). Where parental expectations form part of the structural constraints that young people operate within, to navigate this through purposefully boundary-crossing conversations and choices is an agentic practice in pursuit of challenging gender norms. In negotiating the limits of their constraining environments, the participants are compromising where appropriate. When speaking out on transgressive gender norms or social values, the participants demonstrate that tactical agency does not only exist in resource-constrained environments but is relevant in the agentic practice of affluent young people. It is an ever-changing agentic practice too, given the participants' compromising may change over time as they get older, in which their values or relationship dynamics may change.

3.9 Alignments between international and local attributes of youth

This section brings together the multiple attributes of youth in this chapter – from across the ‘youth as agents of change model’, to GAGE, and to Bangladeshi young people – to note similarities and pose considerations for these alignments.

The narrative review has brought to light how, in the era of the SDGs, development agency narratives have homogenised the contribution of youth in development towards the imagined ‘youths as agents of change’. Young people are urged to partake in formalised development and *play the rules of the game* for the benefit of development efficiency, rather than for their desire to improve their own lives.

Within international levels, this analysis has exposed the inconsistencies in norm translation from the textual framework for the SDGs to the intermediaries of development actors, i.e. between how the SDGs propose the role of youth versus development actors’ in the pursuit of the same gender equality norms. Development actors give more credence and specificity to the role of youth in pursuing social actions towards achieving the goals, who are only vaguely given reference to in the SDGs. Similarities maintain, however, in the prescriptivism of the ‘youth as agents of change’ model that mirrors the coloniality of the SDGs.

Through discussions of ‘agents of change’, ‘changemakers’, and ‘citizenship’, the youth participants partake in constructing a young, heroic figure as the leader for social change – though do not necessarily see themselves as taking up the mantle or code this as specifically feminine. The findings

demonstrate these young people, much like the youth imagined in the 'youth as agents of change' model, similarly want better governance and stronger relationships with governments. Though some participants mentioned the legitimacy of young people engaging with political leaders, this was not given as much prominence as normative 'youth as agents of change' rhetoric suggest. Common alternative visions of youth agency, such as anarchic youth agents, passivity, or narratives of youth as optimistic and naïve (McEvoy-Levy, 2018), are reductive in light of the findings. The participants exhibit a balance of optimism and pessimism about the trajectory of social change in Bangladesh: based on the social values of future generations overtaking traditional values.

The participants are motivated to pursue social change for various reasons: because it is the right thing to do – often in light of their personal experiences; because they have learnt that, upon gaining knowledge about these issues, they should share this; and that they should share their progressive values in contention with traditional norms. The participants partake in a discourse of superiority because of their liberal values around gender and social change which contrasts with specific demographics of the Bangladeshi population. By elevating their values as supposedly rooted in 'globalism' – specifically owing to the internet – and as an inevitability in the future, the participants unintentionally speak to class privilege and Western ethnocentric ideas of modernity. These ideas are complementary to the white, liberal feminist racialised imaginations of the 'global south' and liberalised change pathways that are also employed in the 'youth as agents of change' model.

As participants with relative class, educational, and urban privilege, the research demonstrates agentic actions that are specific to this demographical group. The material resources – internet access, time to peruse social media – and educational opportunities – to partake in extracurricular activities such as debate clubs and feminist clubs – all give ample opportunity for participants to articulate and act on their personal politics. Perhaps, for the participants who contend with their parents' career expectations, their class privilege affords them the ability to pursue goals that are not based on financial income as a basis for the families' survival but based on self-fulfilling hopes and ambitions. The relative lack of differentiation between participants, particularly on the lines of gender, can be attributed to this class privilege as well.

Why do these local ideas of youth agency align with international attributes of youth? It is likely for youth adaption or adoption of SDG norms on 'gender' to reproduce or complement dominant power structures of coloniality and their role as 'agents of change', believing it is in the best interests of their needs and economic and social contexts (Kabeer, 1999). Romani (2016) argues that, in contexts that

have been imbued by NGO narratives of gender equality, some young people adopt and rework these norms to embody this discourse in their cultural practices, thereby self-distinguishing from local young people who did not grow up with NGOs. This is similar to how the participants set themselves apart from those with 'traditional mindsets', thereby making the agentic choice to reproduce normative Western liberalist narratives that 'gender equality norms' are superior to alternative values. Concepts of Structuration and contesting doxa are pertinent here. The participants cannot be blamed for not having an overtly distinct politics when they— like many other young human agents across the world – are equally informed by their context as they seek to pursue actions to change their contexts.

3.10 Misalignments between international and local attributes of youth

This section notes the differences between the multiple attributes of youth in this chapter – from across the 'youth as agents of change model', to GAGE, and to Bangladeshi young people – and poses considerations for misalignments between these evidence sources.

Themes around the politics of inclusion and formal participation/civic action that were given particular importance in the 'youth as agents of change' model are not relevant to the participants. Perhaps, this demonstrates how most of the participants do not engage in formal youth advocacy and accountability programming, instead partaking in debate clubs and informal social media action.

Social accountability is shown in this analysis to be highly valorised by development actors and is demonstrative of the 'NGOisation of resistance' (O'Malley and Johnson, 2018). The politics of individual responsibility can be problematised in social accountability through the following areas: 1) pushback from adults and authorities; 2) youth as data-driven innovators; 3) unrealistic assumptions about state capacity to respond; and 4) the repackaging of top-down imposed norms as youth-led.

- (1) Pushback from adults and authorities: The interviewee of Actor B noted that the training of young people to be 'gender advocates/activists' comes with challenges: "when you say to a guardian in rural level, don't marry off girls etc., parents don't listen... so they mostly work with peers". Religious norms also pose a barrier to Actor B's advocacy programming. By working with madrasas, they are required to reiterate their work is not contradictive with Islamic conventions as they cannot risk a backlash if madrasas are seen to be affiliated with advocacy that may be interpreted as in contention with Islam. Youth are put in publicly controversial positions.

- (2) Youth as data-driven innovators: The pivotal role given to youth-led accountability or advocacy is based on a normative assumption that youth have specific tendencies to be naturally inquisitive researchers or data-driven innovators.
- (3) Unrealistic assumptions about state capacity to respond: Youth-led social accountability is a process that holds unrealistic assumptions about social systems. Upon citizen action towards the improved accessibility and transparency of data, the state is viewed as capable of responding – or receptive to change – and this leads to the effective delivery of a certain standard or public services or funding agreement. This shifts the blame for a lack of progress onto the citizen, who is required to be occupied to think about problems and then advocate for them; a characteristic that not all young citizens will have the privilege to enact.
- (4) The repackaging of top-down imposed norms as youth-led: Where these youth-led campaigns involve being trained in contestable ideas around 'GEWE', the emphasis on 'bottom up' and youth-ownership of these campaigns may be questioned. Education towards ideals of gender equality, as well as other normative values around development and sustainability, are imparted to 'youth advocates' through campaign training workshops (Development Alternative). This is a form of norm translation, in which development actors' neoliberal norms can become repackaged as young people's ideas.

The inclusion of young people through advocacy and social accountability becomes a way to manage their dissent to suit the promotion of liberalised development agendas. This active citizenship is based on suppositions of young people as natural leaders, actors in peer-to-peer roles, or innovators in data collection and social accountability; all of which are based on an elitist, liberalist, and heteronormative vision of youth. The assumption for young people – particularly of the 'global south' – to be pioneers for change is, in actuality, an essentialism that is suited to justify cost-efficient development programming. The global youth population have been framed using a positive agentic norms discourse that piles the burden of social change on their shoulders by providing emphasis on specific 'activist' actions e.g. data collection and youth leadership. All such elements are foundational in the 'youth as agents of change' model and thereby suggest that individualism is entrenched in the pursuit of gender equality norms in the SDG era. International ideas of youth agency, exemplified by how youth are attributed, is based on grandiose ideas of youth agency to enact change.

Notably, for a demographic group that is comprised of urban, affluent, and actively 'engaged' young people, the SDGs hold little value. With the disconnect between the participants' personal connection

with the SDGs and the assumptions in the narrative analysis, it can be considered that the top-down norms of the SDGs hold little sway over this particular grouping of young people.

The participants mostly reject seeing themselves under the altruistic leaders/changemakers construct that is outlined in the 'youth as agents of change' model. This belief is indicative of the more mundane actions they participate in; they do not generally go beyond the remits of their existing social, familial, or schooling networks. The agentic actions of these participants differ from the final stages of the 'youth as agents of change' model: rather than partake in social action projects or campaigns that were outlined in the NGO interviews, the participants mostly engage with more informal, less distinctive actions towards social change – involving social media or interpersonal conversation. This is likely due to all participants, barring one, not being affiliated with an NGO which enrolls young people in such programming.

These findings speak to alternative ways to envision youth activism and agency, beyond the normative participatory action proposed by the SDGs, to include informal and less tangible acts. Participants' values and critical actions in light of gender equality norms are heterogeneous. Some participants, like Asif, spoke more at length than others about their relationships with their parents, while Radhika shared her experience with her debate club. Young people's employment of voice and aspirations will vary as these dynamic components of agentic action constitute their personal politics and are informed by cultural and contextual factors.

Agentic action is that which contends with doxa, the often-unsaid rules and behaviours of society. Rather than *changing* norms, and setting a new collective standard, the participants are crossing the boundaries of existing norms (Marcus and Harper, 2014). As previously mentioned, Kenny et al. (2019, p.109) note agentic action for youth can involve "facilitating critical conversations across adolescents' social networks, including their peers, family, and other community members" (Kenny et al., 2019, p.109). Parental relationships present two components: 1) an aspect of life where young people feel constrained to live out their idealised behaviours and social values, as doxa; and 2) an opportunity to demonstrate the tenacity of youth agency to pursue goals (towards gender equality values) when not in an environment that is directly urging young people to do so. Examples such as Asif's debates with his mother demonstrate how youth's idealised social values frame their relationships with other people in their networks. Perhaps, parental relationships demonstrate young peoples' tactical agency given that youth must navigate appropriate or inappropriate norms imbued by the parents to legitimise themselves in such debates. The participants renegotiate the doxa of their contexts through

their relationships with their parents because parental and community expectations often comprise young people's doxa. Through an exploration of participants' relationships with their parents, it is possible to find insights into young people's decision-making processes, freedom of movement, and ability to speak their minds in their homes. Consideration can be made to young people rejecting or adapting the social and gender norms imbued by parents and their community, as much as young people's rejection or adaption of gender equality norms. Tangentially, these themes bring up a wider aspect of youth agency that is also erased in the SDG era, what space is there for convincing adults to respect young people's voices?

The minutiae of these agentic actions show that credence should also be given to young people who do not play into the change agent norm or consider themselves to be an activist. This study's findings deconstruct the spectacle of the young agent and its attributing burdens, to recognise the mundanity of young people's lives. Benigno (2021) suggests that teen girl activism in a neoliberal context can involve a politics of care and community (be it online or in-person); characteristics of anti-neoliberal and decolonial praxis. Instead, of focusing on futurity and the potentiality of girls' futures, it is a view of young people's agency that values where they are currently. Here, the participants simultaneously care about gender equality and social change but do not see themselves as leaders. The participants of this study very much occupy a complicated space that breaks away from the imposed norms of the SDG era, whilst simultaneously engaging in surface-level representational politics. The participants are unsettling normative ideas of activism to include everyday informal acts and undue focus away from structural change.

Young people enacting the 'youth as agents of change' norm, or resisting the norm, can be manifested in multiple ways that are not necessarily mutually exclusive: as part of the NGOisation of resistance and in everyday informalities. It is such insights that demonstrate the necessity of norm theory in this thesis to propose where the participants may be engaged in the process of translating, receiving, or perpetuating the norms of the SDGs. Youth agency within this process is complex, demonstrating the fallacy of how youth agency is imagined in the SDG era itself: youth are spreading emergent gender equality norms in their networks which defy the SDGs whilst internalising the more normative gender equality norms around them without resistance, such as individualisation of social change.

GAGE differs from many development actors in how youth are represented, as GAGE's research demonstrates gender equality norms are situationally specific and the variability of gender norms in a given community. For example, Guglielmi's et al. (2021a) analysis of Rohingya girls recognises the

role of 'doxa' as the unquestionable practices and behaviours that reproduce norms around child marriage and gender in Rohingya communities.

Participants in my research showed differing constraints to the constraints described by youth who face the possibility of child marriage (Presler-Marshall and Stavropoulou, 2017; Guglielmi et al., 2019). Because the participants' families have more certainty over their financial stability in the future, they face less contention with their parents over career aspirations. GAGE's large evidence base reviews and quantitative surveying find many daughters' futures are strictly shaped by the parental aspiration for daughters to be educated and marry later in life so that they may have a respectable occupation and status as a wife (Stavropoulou et al., 2017; Alam et al., 2019a). In rural Bangladeshi contexts, educational attainment is seen as a respectable quality in a woman it is a value that is closely tied to a women's status as a wife (Schuler, 2007). There are dualistic attitudes on child marriage, in which an emphasis on girls' marriageability exists in tandem with pursuing education either before marriage or skills-building after marriage (Camfield et al., 2017; Guglielmi et al., 2021b). Despite their socioeconomic differences from the sample population of GAGE's research, the participants in this thesis are also living in a context in which they are submitted to multiple networks of gender norms and gender equality norms that may coexist or compete. The participants spoke about the gendering of their school environments yet are urged for their aspirations to not be marred by their gender identity. Some participants can speak publicly about gender equality in online spaces or debate clubs but cannot do so with their parents. It is in this specific way that the youth researched in this thesis sit in multiple domains and must navigate the norms of a given environment which may contend with another environment they sit in.

GAGE's studies provide a nuanced picture of a context in which gender equality norms may exist in tandem with traditionalist gender norms. And so, GAGE represents an international actor that differs from others in how it represents youth.

3.11 Conclusion

By exploring how youth is imagined across development actors (narrative analysis), GAGE, and some Bangladeshi youth, this chapter has answered RQ 1 (Why do attributes of youth align and misalign across international and local levels?).

The 'youth as agents of change' model is predicated on grandiose suppositions of young people as natural leaders, actors in peer-to-peer roles, or innovators in data collection and social accountability. These factors contribute to a specific imagining of a racialised 'girl change agent' because they inherently involve characteristics that are already coded feminine in gender and development (as established by white, liberal feminist critiques (Calkin, 2015, Taft, 2020)) and boyhoods are minimally explicitly included. Participants' local ideas of youth are shown to be complementary to international actors' imaginations of youth, through their ideas of what constitutes 'agents of change', 'changemakers', and citizenship. Though not specifically about youth, the young people coded these terms as youth-centric. On why alignments between international and local levels exist, the participants' adherence to 'globalism' and liberal values around gender and social change caters to class privilege, Western ethnocentric ideas of modernity. It feeds into an idea of the inevitability of younger generations setting the agenda for what gender norm change looks like. Perhaps unwittingly, participants share in the racialised and spectacularised discourses used by international actors who are embedded in the white, liberal politics of the SDGs. In this way, the global/local disjuncture is not between supposedly global, 'progressive' agenda-setting institutions and local, 'traditional' grassroots communities. Rather, it is about praxis that erases and undermines the needs of the most marginalised.

Parental relationships were a lens to demonstrate how participants with significantly more freedom of movement, financial privilege, and technological access than GAGE participants are also subject to constraints in their agency. Through tactical agency, participants' agency concerns the everyday mundanity of shifting existing gender norms rather than setting new collective standards outlined in the international domain. It is in this way that youth attributes across international and local levels misalign.

Why does this local youth agency misalign with international attributes of youth? At the international level, youth are racialised and fetishised, as youths' everyday lives are made to be embedded in and held responsible for the global pursuit of neoliberal frameworks of 'sustainability' and economic growth (Desai, 2016). In the 'youth as agents of change' model, there is no consideration for the nuanced constraints that youth experience in their parental relationships. Considering the trajectory for development, the shift from womanhoods to youth (particularly girlhoods) demonstrates the active citizen or responsible agent in development imagination now encompasses all life stages. There is a change in target age and a focus on maximised potential, which provides an 'opportunity' to develop marketable skills and self-actualise one's own empowerment from a young age. The liberal

feminist politics of inclusion requires development interventions that pose youth to be 'invested in' and trained to market themselves as economic investments in value-for-money tools as 'agents of change' who may invoke the targets towards 'gender equality'. Ultimately, the altruistic youth are required to pursue normative values towards 'Sustainable Development' and 'gender equality' whilst navigating patriarchal and capitalist structures that actively inhibit such values.

In the SDG era, many development actors follow the 'youth as agents of change' model to maintain the general mechanics of global development with 'youth' as an innovative and cost-efficient new ingredient. The white, liberal feminisms apparent in much development actor discourse is manifested by seeking the *rules of the game* to stay the same – e.g. little accountability from transnational corporations or no reckoning with the violent legacy of colonial gender binaries – whereby young people are the innovative and cost-efficient ingredient in the mechanics of global development (Calkin, 2015a). Youth agency is spectacularised in a logic that is based on a politics of inclusion and representation. The 'youth as agents of change' model's imagination of youth ultimately maintains colonial modes of subjectification and homogenisation of 'global south' populations and avoidance of accountability of the roots of global inequalities.

4 Chapter Four: Why do gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is the second of three consecutive empirical chapters that analyse youth agency in pursuit of gender equality in the SDG era, an analysis that is deconstructed into elements of youth attributes, gender equality norms, and theories of youth empowerment in social change. This chapter explores how gender equality norms themselves are imagined across the SDG era. This chapter unpacks an essential component of SDG era 'youth agency' by proposing the aligning and misaligning ideals of gender equality norms across international and local actors. As noted in section 1.10.2 ('Gender equality norms'), I refer to 'gender equality' norms, as a mandate for gender norm change, i.e. outlining which gender norms are validated or erased (Engberg-Pederson et al., 2019). This is inclusive of the SDGs, development actors, and young people's own mandate for gender equality.

This chapter answers RQ 2, which asks: Why do gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels? It will 1) explore the implicit assumptions of what constitutes gender inequality and injustice in the 'youth as agent change' model and 2) analyse the thematic gaps that arise in the GAGE data on gender equality norms. Then, this chapter will explore how gender equality norms are conceptualised at local levels by 3) analysing the GAGE raw dataset that uncovers local-level Bangladeshi gender equality norms, 4) presenting Bangladeshi youths' definitions of 'GEWE', 'gender norms', and thoughts on LGBTQ+ rights and issues, and 5) uncovering how the participants' own gender equality norms are manifested in their agentic practice, through voice and aspirations. To follow, it analyses how these local gender equality norms 6) align and 7) misalign with development actor norms. And so, this chapter provides a direct response to considering why international and local ideas of gender equality norms are in misalignment.

This chapter presents findings from the narrative analysis and the interviews with youth-oriented NGO staff which, in conjunction, contribute to an exploration of international-level ideas of gender equality norms. The narrative analysis is of development actors' language that justifies youth to incite change towards the pursuit of 'GEWE'. The NGO interviews were with three participants – each a representative from a UK or Bangladeshi youth-oriented NGO – and explored why youth-centred NGOs use the mandate of 'youth as agents of change' in the pursuit of 'GEWE' when delivering

programmatic and policy action towards achieving the SDGs. This chapter presents one component of the 'youth as agents of change' model: that gender inequality lies in interpersonal norms. This chapter presents illustrative quotes from selected sources (from the narrative analysis) and data collected in the NGO interviews, juxtaposed with critical theoretical analysis in light of how the examples uphold the notion that gender inequality lies in interpersonal norms, within the 'youth as agent of change' model. By interrogating how organisations define concepts in the domain of inequality and injustice, it is possible to draw out the assumptions afforded to young people in tackling these supposedly interpersonal gender equality norms. In the 'youth as agents of change' model, the individualised inputs (education, opportunities for critical skills development, access to support networks) are justified by a neoliberal ideology that sees gender inequality as manifested only through interpersonal norms.

This chapter presents results from the original analyses of GAGE data and the survey tool, as distinct entities. An analysis of the survey tools demonstrates an international actors' investigation of what counts as gender equality norms. Following, my analysis of the raw data collected using the survey uncovers local Bangladeshi ideas of gender equality norms.

Building on the GAGE data, I present findings on gender equality norms by affluent Bangladeshi youth, regarding: definitions of 'GEWE'; definitions of 'gender norms'; and thoughts on LGBTQ+ rights and issues. These findings are the result of analysis from the Bangladeshi youth study, made up of interviews, image prompts, and a 14-day diary activity, which will put forward an exploration of local-level ideas of gender equality norms. Participants place much emphasis on individual behaviours, attitudes and stereotypes, speaking to a belief of interpersonal gender norms as the locus of inequality and micro-level gender norm change. The importance given to interpersonal gender norms plays a part in the logical step held by the participants that the pursuit of gender equality lies in citizen action and between people.

This chapter argues participants' own gender equality norms are manifested in their agentic practice too, through both voice and aspirations, respectively. This analysis is based upon the analytical lens for the heterogenous ways youth may enact their own gender equality visions, under prevailing gender equality norms (i.e. of the SDG era) (outlined in section 1.11.2 ('Agency, structuration, and norms in dialogue')). This is insightful to identifying participants' agency in how their expression of voice, through social media and public engagement activities, is a tool for sharing their idealised gender equality norms with their social networks and the public. Another agentic practice is the

participants' personal and societal aspirations for an idealised future. The rejection and adaption of social norms by young people can come about in their imagined futures which give an insight into their idealised gender norms and their capacity to imagine beyond current social norms.

This chapter then considers how these gender equality norms both align and misalign with development actor norms, a key component in answering RQ 2 on how gender equality norms may align and misalign. In some ways, the participants support the vision of change held in the 'youth as agents of change' model, pertaining to the importance given to interpersonal norms as the locus of gender inequality. This chapter argues for the participants' embeddedness in a liberalised usage of voice as a means to an end, where awareness-raising in isolation is thought to effect change, from a neoliberal point of view (Dingo, 2018). The participants' aspirations about social values in the future too show embeddedness in liberal feminist thinking. The agentic practice of imagining futures gives an insight into their respective gender equality values; values that fall into the domain that considers inequality as a lack of access and opportunity for individuals. Yet, disparities in gender equality norms are found between development actors and youth, such as youths' uncertain personal futures, emphasis on the detrimental effect of gender norms on men and masculinities, and strong visions for improved LGBTQ+ rights.

This chapter proposes that international actors hold liberalised ideas of gender equality norms that overburden the individual's role in change. Youth agency at the local level is heterogenous across the participants, with some of their gender equality norms overlapping with the liberal politics of individualism in the SDG era.

4.2 The 'youth as agents of change' model: Gender inequality lies in interpersonal norms

Of the 42 source materials in the narrative analysis, 25 spoke to the nature of gender inequality. This is useful in building a response to international-level understandings of 'gender equality norms', a key component to answering RQ 2 (Why do gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?). By identifying the various ways that organisations may define 'gender inequality' or 'injustice', it is possible to get to the crux of how they identify the 'problem' they wish to change and what may be included/excluded in their gender equality norms.

My analysis finds that across organisations, gender inequalities are emphasised to exist in the individual, or interpersonal domain, such as in household decision-making, relations in the workplace, or the use of public transport. For example, *Girls Not Brides (2018)* identifies gender inequality as the social, economic, political and legal interpretation of physical differences. Most source materials lacked clarity on where inequality, power imbalances, or structural oppression is located, the perpetrating actors, and/or how gender inequality intersects with other modes of oppression/inequality (e.g. capitalist exploitation).

Figure 6, below, signifies inputs towards youth agency. This section provides an analysis of why such inputs are valorised: a neoliberal ideology that sees gender inequality as manifested only through interpersonal norms. It is because of this ideology that inputs towards improving young peoples' agency remain in the realm of knowledge and resource access, implying behavioural change. Explained later in this section is that gender inequality is solved when individual youth pursue actions signified in Point F (youth holding decision-makers to account) and Point G (peer-to-peer knowledge spread). My analysis suggests the dominant justifications at play when youth are constructed to be 'agents of change' to address gender inequality; justifications framed by an emphasis on the individual under a white, liberal feminist lens.

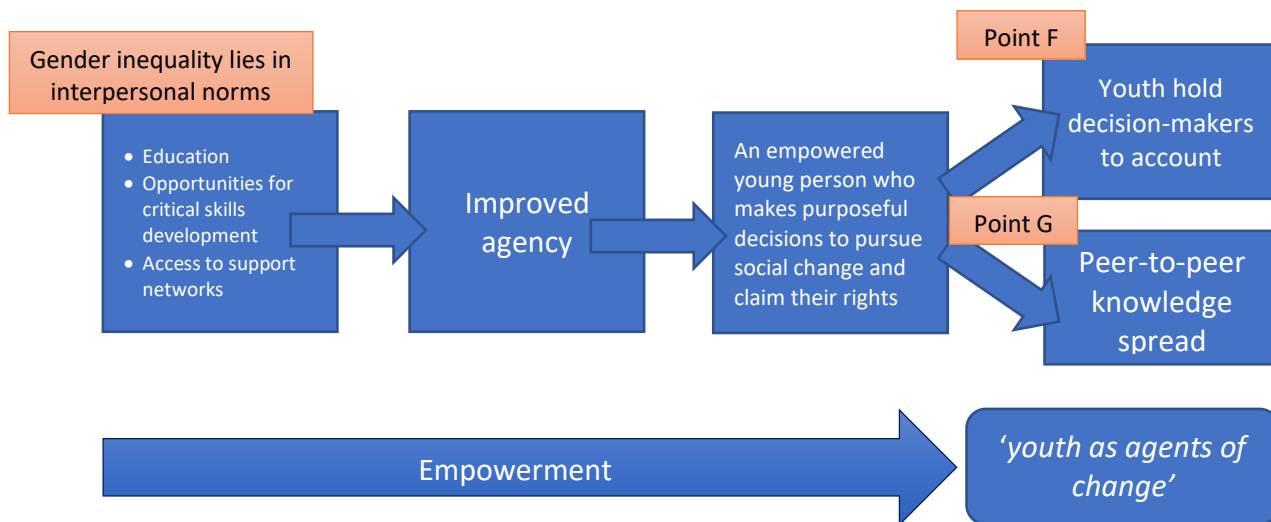


Figure 6: The 'youth as agents of change' model (author's own)

There is much written by these organisations about what norms are; all of which encompass the general topic that gender norms dictate values and appropriate/inappropriate behaviour according to gender identity (Plan International UK, 2019). For example, a dominant thread found in the narrative

analysis is that gender norms are patterns of behaviour and beliefs that reflect shared social expectations and deep social structures to maintain gender inequality (Womankind International, 2017): preventing women and girls from participating in political activity; limiting their access to education; imposing high levels of unpaid domestic work; and truncate their efforts to claim and use their rights (Plan International, 2017; Save the Children, 2017). Plan International (2017) holds a framework that gender norms are alleviated once addressing the root causes of gender inequality – that of the subordination of women and girls. Gender norms “determine women’s access to health, education, financial stability, safety, and overall wellness” (ATHENA International, 2018, p.9), owing to “gender bias, judgment from conservative religious groups, or disapproval by traditional authorities” (Girl Up, Rise Up, 2019, p.64). This is elaborated by Actor B, in which the interviewee noted other areas gender inequality is present: mobility in public spaces; low female graduate job placements; and religious extremism. In public spaces, they are discriminated against in the job market when equally qualified, or their leadership in the workplace is not taken seriously, and their movement is restricted owing to the high risk of harassment in public transport (Actor A). Gender norms are also considered closely connected to ‘harmful practices’ (DFID, 2015) as gender norms cause a disparity in value between genders, which thereby results in child marriage and other harmful practices that prevent girls and women from exploring their full ‘potential’. The Actor B interviewee noted a disparity in how gender norms are manifested between cities and rural areas, in which rural areas face much stronger inequalities. Actor A recognises that in rural areas women or girls are often discriminated against in household decision-making, education, income, and the distribution of food to sons over daughters, and there is a preference for girls to be married at a young age rather than attend secondary schooling.

A notable point of gender inequality according to Actor B is the lack of discussion of gender norms and gender equality issues in schooling, given its lack of presence in curriculums and the widespread criticism that often comes with any teacher who expresses knowledge on these ideas. According to Actor B’s research, 40% of their survey respondents do not know what gender equality means, in which ‘toxic masculinity’ is perpetuated in classrooms due to inadequate education on such topics. Similarly, young people involved in Actor C give much focus to poor sex education, lack of knowledge on periods, and body image as the locus of the gender norms they experience, likely due to their age of 13-16 years old.

Patriarchy is mentioned only by a few organisations, such as Save the Children (2017) and Womankind International (2017) who regard it as structures and practices of male domination at all levels in

private and public life, including in governments, businesses, communities and homes around the world, which affects men and boys too. Though lip service is paid to patriarchy, there remains a failure across the sources to link patriarchy with capitalist and extractive modes of power in the pursuit of 'GEWE'. Implicitly this suggests the system functions correctly, and it is people who must change themselves by adopting the 'right' attitudes. As well, like GAGE, organisations such as Oxfam (2016), Save the Children (2017), and Womankind International (2017) were found in their texts to speak to an understanding of the intersecting marginalities. These organisations note youth suffer multiple or intersectional discrimination when their identities overlap, such as being LGBTQ+ or ethnic minorities – which exacerbates strong barriers to meaningful participation in society.

Some of Actor A and Actor B's work goes beyond targeting the interpersonal nature of gender inequality. For example, Actor A works in policy interventions, to identify gaps for government agencies to address gender equality. Actor A noted gender inequality exists in education and health services, similarly touched upon by Actor C. Despite higher awareness-raising of gender in Bangladesh, the Actor A interviewee noted the circumstances of Covid-19 means such progress has been reversed. Actor B advocates for gender equality in their policy interventions, such as inputting into the 2017 Child Marriage act and collaborating as a technical partner in a national curriculum course on child marriage and gender-based violence. Regarding the SDGs, Actor A works with the government strategy plan that runs every five years and has its own strategy plan every five years towards meeting the goals.

Many development actors erase the pre-existing power structures and ideologies that imbue the subordination of women, heteronormativity, or inequality based on gender identity (Biressi, 2018) through the failure of acknowledging these topics in their documents. Also, in the 'youth as agents of change' narrative, there is no consideration of the power imbalances embedded in the institutional contexts that cause and maintain intersectional inequalities (Briant Carant, 2017). And so, young people represent the purported success of the neoliberal logic and are made responsible for lifting themselves out of poverty, through the means exemplified in Point F (youth holding decision-makers to account) and G (peer-to-peer knowledge spread). The disproportionate focus on norms relates the problem of inequality to cultural and interpersonal relations, more than structural issues, which supports the development agencies' case to burden the pursuit of social change onto average citizens, i.e. young people. The emphasis on interpersonal 'gender inequalities' is likely due to the organisations' training of young people in such concepts. An understanding of interpersonal gender

inequalities and norms is simpler than that of broader structural inequalities, which is outlined by Actor C's interviewee.

Across most organisations in the analysis, gender inequalities are emphasised to exist in the individual, or interpersonal domain, such as in household decision-making, relations in the workplace, or the use of public transport. Structural factors that frame such areas – e.g. impoverishment, inaccessibility of public transport, and workplace policies – are given limited priority. By interrogating how organisations define concepts in the domain of inequality and injustice, I drew out the assumptions afforded to young people in tackling these supposedly interpersonal issues. It is the young people that are privileged enough to be mostly at the end of interpersonal inequalities and can act upon it that are counted in the 'agents of change' rhetoric.

4.3 GAGE: International ideas of gender equality norms found in survey tools

I investigated the GAGE Baseline Survey questions itself, as well as organisations it draws inspiration from which are the Young Lives (2006; 2009; 2014a; 2014b; 2017a; 2017b) India studies and the Baseline Global Early Adolescence Survey (2019) in Indonesia. As an international development actor, the survey tools give light on the kinds of gender equality norms that are given precedent in their study (and affiliated studies).

From my analysis of the survey tools (Baird's et al., 2019), GAGE questions on gender norms, community norms and expectations can be grouped into girls' schooling; girls' behaviours; comparisons between girls and boys; marriage and the household; work; finances; non-marital romantic relationships and girls' sexual lives; and IPV (intimate partner violence). The surveys collect responses to statements as a means of collecting data around gender norms. These statements inquire 1) what the AF thinks, 2) what the AF thinks the community expects, and 3) what the AF thinks happens in the community. Notably, a few statements are repeated but framed in these 3 different ways, e.g. "I think household tasks should be shared equally"/ "The community expects household tasks to be shared equally"/ "In the community, household tasks are shared equally". And so, GAGE demonstrates an almost systematic way of investigating the holism of gender norms.

The three surveys included questions conducted as 'Agree, Disagree, or Partially Agree' Likert scale-type questions. The topics which are framed in this way include sending girls to school, boys and girls sharing household tasks, men having the final word in household decision-making, women having the

same chance to work as men, and expectations for the family to control daughters' behaviour. There is only one question concerning boyhood which does not concern girlhood ("Boys should be able to show their feelings without fear of being teased" (Baird et al., 2019, p.12)), which could be expanded to improve understanding of boys' ability to exercise 'transgressive' behaviours without judgement. Much of the questioning in the Baseline questionnaire and the other surveys was about boyhood in comparison to girlhood (e.g. "our culture makes it harder for girls to achieve their goals than boys" (Baird et al., 2019, p.12)). Where boys' experience of gender is based around those of girls', girlhoods are hypervisibilised in the investigation of gender norms. A notable factor of the Young Lives (2006; 2009; 2014a; 2014b; 2017a; 2017b) is that it seeks data on transgressive behaviour for girls, yet there is a lack of questions collecting data on how boys may transgress gender norms that are not in relation to girls/women.

The questionnaires do not ask explicitly about gender expectations around voice, freedom of movement, young people's decision-making abilities, or going against parental expectations. As well as in the GAGE survey tools, there is no data collected that pertains to what young people believe the community itself thinks. It is for such reasons that the vignettes used in my original empirical work served to collect data on the opportunities the participants see for pursuing social change, concerning parents, peers, and the community/school. The Baseline Global Early Adolescence Survey (2019) collects data around a comparison between boys and girls regarding the acceptability of romantic relationships, as to highlight a double standard that rewards boys and penalises girls. The study asked whether "it was okay to tease a girl who acted like a boy or a boy who acted like a girl" (ibid, p.43) and that "boys who behave like girls are considered weak" (ibid, p.43). This topic was expanded to whether there was an expectation for boys to display toughness and other such hegemonic masculine traits and for girls to display vulnerabilities.

Where liberal feminisms often overburden women with both work and caring responsibilities (discussed in Chapter Two), there is a lack of questioning in GAGE research about whether young people are privy to such burdens and hold their own criticisms over normative goals around gender equality. GAGE's research pertains to investigating the gender norms that young people live under, and not necessarily themes around young peoples' idealised gender norms. It was for such reasons that, in this study, I chose to question their reflections on their own views of gender equality, including how 'gender equality' is portrayed in the media they consume and talked about in their social circles. In doing so, I could explore how these understandings may differ, complement, or mirror the top-

down imposed norms of ‘GEWE’ and ‘youth as agents of change’ in a way that GAGE has not given precedence to.

4.4 GAGE: Local ideas of gender equality norms found in original analyses

The remainder of this chapter – until section 4.10 which synthesises this chapter's contrasting analyses – will speak to the local level aspect of RQ 2 on gender equality norms. This section presents my analysis of the raw data from the 2017/18 GAGE Baseline Survey for Adult Female Respondents (Baird et al., 2019) to find what the data uncovers about local Bangladeshi ideas of gender equality norms. The survey captures attitudes and genders in Dhaka with 1792 adult female (AF) respondents, who were the adult female household members and caregivers of GAGE’s adolescent Core Respondents (young people born between 2000-2007) in the longitudinal study. As a baseline survey, questions were wide enough to cover GAGE’s conceptual framework – education, health and nutrition, economic empowerment, psychosocial well-being, voice and agency, and violence and bodily integrity. It also included much essential personal information for context including, but not limited to, family background, owned goods, dwelling characteristics, health, and time allocation. The questionnaire is incredibly in-depth in these regards, and as such data around gender norms and community expectations is understandably limited in comparison. The original analysis of data presented here is thereby cherry-picked from a much broader aggregation of data and is presented, perhaps, without due contextual information.

My selection of relevant GAGE data – from the Attitudes and Social Norms sections respectively, is represented in Table 3²¹.

Adult female responses				
	Statements	Agree	Partially Agree	Disagree
Values in which girls should be promoted to the space of men and boys	Shared household tasks between boys and girls	82%	11%	7%
	Women and girls having their own savings	98.10%	1.20%	0.70%
	Girls should complete secondary schooling	78%	9.10%	12.90%
	Equal opportunities for work (between genders)	82.60%	7.80%	9.60%
	Domestic violence is unacceptable	70.40%	13.50%	16.10%

²¹ Data only represents an aggregate of responses of ‘agree’, ‘partially agree’, and ‘disagree’. ‘No response’ and ‘Don’t know’ answers have been excluded from the percentages.

Divergence from normative values around 'gender equality'	Violence in husband-and-wife relations are private matters	68%	8.40%	23.60%
	Women's roles are to be orientated around care work	62.40%	16%	21.60%
	Obeying the husband in all things	79.50%	13.20%	7.30%
The area of uncertainty – or a split in the total respondent population	A woman who has had pre-marital sex does not deserve respect	46%	12.70%	40.80%
	It is inappropriate for females over 13 to use birth control methods	30.91%	12.21%	54.81%
	A woman should be in control in the decision to use contraception	56.40%	17.60%	26%
	A male household head is believed to have the final word in decision-making	39.80%	15.50%	44.70%
	Women in political or leadership positions fail in their role as mothers and wives	33.40%	28.10%	38.50%
Norms in the community or what they believe happens in the community	The community expect women to have equal work opportunities to men	60.50%	26.40%	13.10%
	Women have equal work opportunities to men	69.10%	21.55%	9.35%
	Girls' goals are harder to achieve than male counterpart	67.20%	19.50%	13.30%
	The community expects (wives and) daughters to be controlled by male head of households	60.80%	19.70%	19.50%
	In the community male decision-making is valorised as maintaining family reputation	70.60%	13.70%	15.70%
	In the community household tasks are not shared equally	64.20%	17.90%	17.90%
	Community members should interfere in husband-and-wife arguments and intimate partner violence	36.30%	28.70%	35%
	Male decision-making on behalf of the whole household is expected in the community	53%	20.30%	26.70%

Table 3: Original analysis of GAGE 2017/2018 Baseline Survey for Adult Females Respondents

The respondents to the 2017/2018 collection of baseline data from ODI's GAGE Programme provide their understanding of gender norms in the home. Adult females are shown to think it is good for girls to be promoted to the space of men and boys. This involved shared household tasks between boys and girls (82% agree, 11% partially agree), women and girls having their own savings (98.1% agree, 1.2% partially agree), girls completing secondary schooling (78% agree, 9.1% partially agree), and equal opportunities for work (82.6% agree, 7.8% partially agree). Also, many respondents believe that domestic violence is unacceptable (70.4% disagree with the practice). The divergence from normative values around 'gender equality is apparent in the following attitudes: respondents believe that violence in husband-and-wife relations is a private matter (68% agree, 8.4% partially agree); women's roles are to be orientated around care work (62.4% agree, 16% partially agree); and obeying the husband in all things (79.5% agree, 13.2% partially agree).

The varied statistics around decision-making show a low majority in favour of male-led decision-making and household control, in which wives and daughters are expected to obey such decisions. Yet, at the same time, women are expected to take on equal work opportunities, have their own savings, and complete secondary schooling. Ultimately there is a vision of gender norms and relations in which women can – with little social resistance – live independently and practice autonomy in their professional and financial lives but must do so with the permission of the male head of household. This leaves a difficulty in practising autonomy in their sexual and reproductive lives. Pre-existing gender relations maintain, but women are permitted – socially, politically, economically, and psychosocially – to navigate the world with more freedom. Though personal attitudes demonstrate disapproval of intimate partner violence, this is believed to be a matter for the individuals to solve and not for the community to renegotiate the behaviours and attitudes that embedded the normality of violence against women.

The respondents also contribute their perceptions of what they make of norms in the community or what they believe happens in the community. They note that the community expect women to have equal work opportunities to men (60.5% agree, 26.4% partially agree), with 69.1% noting this is what happens. 67.2% agree that girls' goals are harder to achieve than their male counterparts (19.5% partially agree). Respondents note the community expects (wives and) daughters to be controlled by the male head of households (60.8% agree, 19.7% partially agree), whereby male decision-making is valorised as maintaining family reputation (70.6% agree, 13.7% partially agree). In the community, household tasks are not shared equally (64.2% agree this is what happens), despite the AF attitudes in favour of it.

These findings demonstrate the tensions between what is personally desired or believed to be appropriate, 'just', or 'gender-equal' by respondents, and how these values and norms may not play out in reality. Perhaps, what people say and what people do is divergent. This data and the line of questioning relay the importance of community expectations and what other people think, regarding the negotiation of gender relations and norms, in that it is a likely inhibiting factor. Such considerations are useful later in this chapter regarding the thesis' research participants' own ideas around gender equality norms and that this is impacted by external factors.

4.5 Bangladeshi youth views: 'Gender equality and women's empowerment'

This section will analyse Bangladeshi youth views of 'gender equality and women's empowerment', which is insightful for exploring local-level understandings of gender equality norms and thereby contribute to answering RQ 2 (Why do gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?). The participants – English Medium School students – were acutely familiar with the concept. When speaking about 'GEWE', the participants all independently spoke on the subject of gender norms without my direction. This is likely due to their pre-existing interest and engagement on the subject of feminisms and social change, such as through social media. In contrast, according to Actor B's research, 40% of their survey respondents (comprised of urban Bangla Medium School students) do not know what gender equality means.

Differently from the development actor construction of gender equality, the young Bangladeshi participants give credence to the role of men and masculinities in the pursuit of gender equality and recognise the oppressive nature of heteropatriarchy on men too. Using the mind mapping exercise (see Research activity 2: Individual Interview Round 2), I compiled a picture of participants' respective idealised visions of gender norm change, i.e. their own gender equality norms. During this exercise, Rumena said:

"Women can wear what they want, men can show emotions they want. People of any gender should show their feeling, and they can talk about it without any discrimination or like any, you know, [response] saying 'man up' or something like that... like we need an emphasis on the women part, but we also need to focus on the men's side, too."

In Rumena's definition, gender equality is about eliminating negative responses to transgressions in existing gender norms. On challenging gender inequality, Asif notes that he does not feel able to

educate people with 'older mindsets' on LGBTQ+ issues. All participants agreed that any gender – particularly men – has a role in tackling gender and that there is too much emphasis on women's roles when we talk about gender equality. All participants believe that gender equality is an issue that personally affects them, and that young people should be able to participate in what 'gender equality' looks like in formal, governmental decision-making.

Participants believed that girls' education needs to be taken more seriously as well as their quality of education. It was regularly brought up that sexual and reproductive health education in schools is core to sexual and reproductive health rights.

The participants were mixed in their reflections on the Likert statement: 'women need to work harder to get men to take them seriously as leaders'. Saima both notes many women are working hard enough, in which it is men that need to step up, but that women can also be sexist. Whereas Yusuf said:

"That's basically because everyone is equal, like if men work hard, woman work hard too. So, they should work harder, just for men to notice them. Yeah, we can see them as leaders, if they're leaders, they'll see that they're leaders, put an extra effort to make other people see you as leaders."

The differences in reflections on the above Likert statement show there are differences in how the participants view the problem of gender inequality as experienced by the individual: whether it is up to women to change, or the problem is the views of the community around them. Perhaps, these findings reflect the complex nature of how gender inequality is experienced. In reflecting on women's work in general following this Likert statement, it is notable that the participants did not bring up women's participation in the garment industry or exploitative conditions experienced by many women workers. Rather the discussion centred around unequal pay for women (with participants who were able to further the subject); an issue that also affects elite, urban women too. It is in this way that the participants are explicitly following the kind of feminism that is discussed by Siddiqui (2009) to be perpetuated by national feminist organisations: one that emphasises the issues experienced by elite women and holds no room for worker-class struggle and unionising efforts.

Such themes around individual behaviours, attitudes and stereotypes speak to a belief of interpersonal gender norms as the locus of inequality and micro-level gender norm change. This belief

is also held by many development actors in their construction of the 'youth as agents of changing gender norms'. The participants fail to acknowledge the relationship between gender inequalities and global capitalist modes of power, much like the construction of the 'youth as agents of change' norm. Perhaps, teenagers cannot be blamed for lacking an intricate and complex knowledge of gender inequalities and global hierarchies of power; for example, the social action projects by the interviewed NGOs involved knowledge dissemination about gender inequality that was likely simplified in the interest of appealing to young people. Nor should this be part of a logical jump in assuming young people are purposefully upholding a neoliberal agenda in the pursuit of gender equality.

Protik – the oldest of the participants – believes that many Bangladeshi young people do not 'practise what they preach', because they have a misunderstanding of gender as a social construct. He noted that they acknowledge gender as a 'social construct' but firmly hold onto biologically determinist ideologies of what is 'feminine' and what is 'masculine'. Rather than problematising the youth Protik refers to, this is further support for the argument that teenagers cannot be blamed for a limited understanding of gender inequality.

When specifically asked about the SDGs, Radhika made note of the exclusions in the framework regarding 'GEWE'. She noted the ambiguity of the targets, specifying the lack of action on discrimination against men, LGBTQ+ rights, and tackling racism. And so, the problem of gender inequality is not only about cultural and interpersonal relations. The SDGs were not given much weight by the other participants.

4.6 Bangladeshi youth views: 'Gender norms'

The Bangladeshi youth participants' views on what comprises 'gender norms' are also useful in compiling an understanding of local-level gender equality norms. This is because how they recognise gender norms are key to establishing the aspects of life and engendering that they would wish to change. As above, participants were familiar with talking about 'gender', 'gender relations' and 'gender norms' given their personal interests in feminism and social change.

Across interviewees, gender norms are manifested in individuals' attitudes and interpersonal stereotypes, with stereotypes noted as a particularly troubling issue for all participants. When asked to use terms adjacent to 'gender', participants tended to note gender as a way to identify people. Faisal, somewhat conversely to the other participants, referred to gender norms as based on biological

and physical attributes. Around the theme of physicality and gender, Saima believed that women are physically weaker: "men and women are the same, just because women are weaker, doesn't mean that they should be oppressed". Rumena recognised gender norms as a social construct:

"So there are two sexes, male and female, you know there are different genders. It's always women, or like girls [who] like pink, boys [who] like blue. Girls like barbies and dolls and boys like action figures. That sort of stuff. Gender stereotypes. A guy can't like feminine things without being gay. A straight man can wear nail polish but that's taboo. Cos in society that's feminine therefore you're gay."

Here, it is notable that Rumena's examples of gender as a social construct pertain to Western-influenced stereotypes, showing how Bangladeshi gender norms are perpetuated by the international domain as well as the local domain.

Despite this, a recurrent theme across the interviews concerned people that fall into 'tradition'. Regarding gender norms, Asif says "there's always people who don't want to accept it, and sort of just fall into their role without having an opinion", noting a lack of critical thinking around gender on their behalf. Rumena puts emphasis on the role of Islam in dictating gender roles in Bangladesh: "Islam says that men can't be women in the feminine [sense], you have to be masculine and show that you're a man". Religious-based gender norms are said by Radhika to be pervasive in Bangladesh, in which Islam is purported as the origin of homophobia in Bangladesh across participants. As well, Radhika speaks to a divide between her peers who think gender roles should be deconstructed altogether and those who wish to subvert existing norms, e.g. men doing household tasks. This somewhat differs from the findings of the narrative analysis, which suggest gender norms as the values and behaviours that determine access to, and quality of experience of, institutions like schooling or rights. The participants have more bodily or physical individualistic experience of gender norms.

The Likert scale statements showed that male participants generally believe they would not be treated differently if they were girls. More specifically, these participants said that they would be mostly treated the same in public spaces if there were a girl. Multiple male participants note that in the schooling space, girls are preferred by teachers as boys are regarded as naughty. Asif notes that, in this way, girls are given preferential treatment by teachers, but this does not bother him. He believes that girls get awarded more opportunities in schools, such as public speaking or leadership opportunities, but female interviewees believe boys get more opportunities in such cases. Yusuf notes

that even the most “close-minded” people in his life still believe girls should participate in science and technology education, employment, and opportunities.

Saima notes that, in her social networks (which can be presumed to apply to the other participants) and in much of Dhaka, girls and boys have equal access to education:

"I can't really say that women don't have access to education because they really because a lot of them do like my maid, my maid's grandchild, my maid's granddaughter, she goes to school for free. My chauffeur's son goes to school for free. So they are still getting an education."

Gender inequalities, as identified by Saima, exist in prevailing gendered expectations and roles, such as men's financial responsibility for the household to gendered toys for children. All female interviewees noted the policing of their clothing in public spaces, given their fear of "being leered at" (Radhika), but Rumena noted that "in public spaces, if I'm going somewhere, regardless of what I'm wearing, there's always going to be creepy men staring at me". This follows the narrative analysis findings of development actor conceptualisation of gender inequality as existing in the individual, or interpersonal domain.

Overall, there is a recognition of victim-blaming based on girls' whereabouts and clothing, with Yusuf perceiving this as rooted in Islamic norms around women being covered:

"Islam says that a woman can't go outside without wearing a burqa. And that forces a limit on their personal style of outfit."

In contrast to Islamic ideals is that of certain media and popular culture in Bangladesh. Asif acknowledged that women are regularly used in media to sell products and felt this was representative of gender inequality due to the objectification of women. This demonstrates the didacticism of Bangladeshi culture which participants are tuned into.

Regarding womanhood, interviewees noted the gender norms most prominent in this realm involved formal work: that women are discouraged to work after marriage, or their work is not seen as important. Radhika expands on this:

"Women have to study up to like undergrad and but after undergrad, they have to get married. But after marriage, they're not allowed to do work, or they're not allowed to have a job. That's like the biggest stereotype in like middle-class families not to have any jobs"

Similarly, women are seen by wider society – according to interviewees – as not able to withstand the stress of politics and Radhika notes that women who are equally qualified to men are not taken as seriously. Yusuf recognises the undermining of women's formal work is stemmed from the expectation to take care of children and the household, "so they can't focus on other things". Yusuf notes the effect this expectation has on young women:

"When a girl or woman is growing up, she hears these expectations or sees these sorts of things happening in their society and that might influence them. So as a result, they might not even want to work when they grow up or they might feel the need to know all sorts of household tasks... Some women might grow up thinking that they shouldn't work, or working is not their responsibility, or they shouldn't be independent and they should depend on men."

Such expectations around formal work appear to be of importance to middle-class femininities, such as the participants. Radhika expands that in rural areas, women are sent to perform domestic work or in the garment industry. In this way, the participant recognises class and location intersect to marginalise women in differing ways.

The participants also had much to say about how gender norms may negatively impact masculinities. Instances where the man stays home and takes care of a child, while the woman goes to work, are seen by society as strange according to the interviewees. Because of this gender norm, it is common for men to be unable to perform household tasks or cook for themselves, thereby relying on female family members. Faisal says it's 'dumb' that men cannot look after themselves but are expected to provide financially for their families.

All interviewees noted that girls are too protected whilst boys have more freedom of movement. Saima noted that "boys are known to be more courageous and more mischievous than girls" but are still expected to practice politeness. All interviewees noted the most prominent of the issues faced by boys is the stigma faced by a boy that is unlike other boys, i.e. practising hegemonic masculinity.

Rumena talked about 'toxic masculinity' of 'macho men' who are "fragile and that's not a good mindset", because it is "sometimes dangerous". She notes that "toxic and fragile masculinity" comes from what religion, family, and society tell you to do, leading to an "unhealthy mindset". Rumena's usage of terms around 'toxic and fragile masculinity' demonstrates her familiarity with popular contemporary feminist terms that seek to problematise social constructs of gender performance and masculinity.

Some interviewees recognised the issue of sexual violence against men. Radhika shared an Instagram post (from '@projectnightfall') about the double standard faced by men who are victims of public sexual harassment:

"This Instagram post spoke to my soul, and I actually realised the horrifying magnitude of gender discrimination in general towards men. The fact that these go almost unnoticed just because men are the victim is so unjust and cruel ... I cannot be blind to the double standards that we as a society have."

In relation to this topic, Radhika brought up "Not All Men", with the intention to speak to sexual violence experienced by men. This is notable given the hashtag's most prominent usage as an anti-feminist sentiment.

The participants' respective explorations of gender norms can all be based on injunctive norms (Nguyen et al., 2019), the idealised behaviours and attitudes held by individuals that can lead to social change, e.g. normalising a woman in the workplace. Again, participants hold a disproportionate focus on interpersonal gender norms and norm change at the micro-level; overshadowing power structures and ideologies that imbue the subordination of women, heteronormativity, or inequality based on gender identity. This was also emphasised by the development actor organisations in the narrative analysis and the interviews. Differently from the development actor construction of gender equality norms, the participants recognise men and masculinities as vital in challenging gender norms.

4.7 Bangladeshi youth views: LGBTQ+ rights and issues

LGBTQ+ rights and issues were given much prominence by most of the interviewees and across genders, and so according to this sample of Bangladeshi youth, are key to their specific local level gender equality norms. Yet, this topic was never explicitly included in my research tools, but my

questions would allow for discussion (e.g. around defining inequality). It is likely this theme came up because LGBTQ+ issues were a much talked about topic amongst the Bangladeshi youth participants in their social networks. Participants noted the generational, religious, and cultural divide that exists in LGBTQ+ acceptance and that given the taboo nature of LGBTQ+ people, participants feel helpless to challenge the stigma.

Participants regarded LGBTQ+ issues as the performance of gender fluidity and interpersonal acceptance of non-normative gender performances. Saima noted that men should be able to wear women's clothes and nail polish and you can wear nail polish without being gay.

Social media was given much prominence as a platform to celebrate and receive education on LGBTQ+ people, including the ability to sign online petitions towards progressing LGBTQ+ rights in Bangladesh. Radhika shared with me Instagram posts celebrating International Transgender Day of Visibility, including one with the following caption:

“Actions to take as an ally: Petitions, pronouns, cut out slurs, support trans businesses and creators, amplify trans’ voices, normalise pronouns, take pressure off trans people, visibility is great but human rights equality and freedom are better, donate”
(Impact, 2021)

Despite their freedom to showcase LGBTQ+ acceptance in online spaces, the participants feel they cannot portray these values in front of adults. When they do bring up the topic of LGBTQ+ rights to their parents, these parents’ values are in opposition to the participants’. Rumena brought up the example of an instance in which she was watching television using the Netflix streaming service, and her father reflected that “Netflix shows are LGBT propaganda” with a negative implication.

Several interviewees noted the generational and cultural divide that exists in LGBTQ+ acceptance and that, given the taboo nature of LGBTQ+ issues, participants feel helpless to challenge the stigma. Saima notes an experience in which, despite her many freedoms in life, she feels disempowered when people “look at me weird” for speaking out about LGBTQ+ issues. Radhika spoke about LGBTQ+ people being seen as Haram (forbidden) in Islam, and at the same time LGBTQ+ people are themselves subjected to injustices and violence which “should be considered [itself] sinful”.

Multiple participants spoke about LGBTQ+ issues by setting up a dichotomy between educatedness versus traditionalism and religion. Radhika believes that "if you go for education, real education, you can't be an Islamic-minded person or both of them will clash". In this way, it is possible to consider that only one form of educatedness is valorised by such sentiments.

The participants' values around LGBTQ+ equality give light to an interesting phenomenon experienced by some Bangladeshi youth who are engaged in normative values around Gender and Social equality: the duality of their identities. They, sincerely, perform a persona that is progressive and outspoken online and with their friends, but also acknowledge the spaces in their personal lives in which they do not wish or need to be outspoken, i.e. with their parents and elder community members.

Regarding the way that LGBTQ+ rights and equality are framed, there is again an emphasis on interpersonal social norms which affect the discrimination and inequality faced by LGBTQ+ populations in Bangladesh. Yet, this surface-level understanding of the heteronormative patriarchy may be due to the little information available to young people about political, legal, social, and economic domains in which diverse sexualities and gender identities are afforded so few freedoms and privileges in Bangladesh. Participants' gender equality norms are that of a change in gender norms that is of inclusive behaviours towards diverse sexualities and gender identities. Overall, the importance given to interpersonal gender norms are formative to the participants' rationale that the pursuit of gender equality lies in citizen action and between people.

4.8 Bangladeshi youth agentic action: Expressing 'voice'

It is possible to gage local level gender equality norms through agency too, further building response to RQ 2 (Why do gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?). The analytical lens of exploring youth agency can show participants' expression of 'voice' is a form of agency: they would purposefully and actively share their idealised gender equality norms with their social networks and the public owing to the enabling structures in which they could freely share their opinions.

To be able to articulate oneself, and to be listened to, is widely recognised by participatory researchers as engaging in a process of agentic action (Duffy, 2011). Appadurai (2004) references voice as a cultural capacity of an individual or actor, that not only purveys a generalised and universal democratic virtue but addresses the social, political, and economic issues that are held by normative ideologies

and doctrines. Given these attributes of voice, this study has sought out the ways that participants use voice to share their social values and gender equality norms with their social networks and the public. This section firstly discusses the participants' usage of social media and then is followed by an exploration of their offline activities, both themes as a demonstration of 'voice' as agentic practice.

4.8.1 Social media

For the participants, social media is seen as a connection to the world and held as dichotomous to 'traditional' Bengali values, including where much of the content they consume is based in Bangladesh. All participants, except for Saima, have their own personal mobile phone devices. Asif, Ali, Protik, and Radhika all have their own personal laptops, whilst the remaining participants share laptops with family members. The Covid-19 Pandemic led to the participants spending more time on social media, at the same time when many of the participants reached an age where they could have greater freedom with their phones and computer devices. It also came at a time when following social issue pages became more popular in their social networks.

Asif enjoys the anonymity aspect of social media, as it has helped his engagement with voicing opinions on social topics:

"I feel like I can be myself on the internet because it is possible to be on the internet without revealing your identity. And having anonymity removes accountability. So, I can freely voice my opinions and thoughts on topics without worry. Although I don't really like the idea that we are scared to share some thoughts when our identities are not hidden"

This is notable given the context that all participants feel somewhat hindered in speaking their values in person, a phenomenon explored in section 3.8 ('Navigating parental expectations and relationships').

The participants view social media as an educational platform about global social issues and to "learn about equality and feminism". One participant said they used to be racist and used the 'N-word', before they "got educated" through social media. The educational aspect of social media is attributive to the kinds of social media content the participants consume, which are as follows:

- TikTok and Instagram mainly
- Body positivity pages

- Mental health IGs
- Current affairs
- Impersonal, public pages
- Meme pages
- Feminism pages

Table 4, below, is comprised of a selection of Instagram pages that the participants forwarded to me, accompanied by their description of the page or why they follow the page.


@hateisavirus	"This is a huge community spreading awareness and working against any types of hate. A community of mobilizers and amplifiers dedicated to dismantling racism and other forms of hate" (Radhika)
@nastyfeminism	"They take a simple but effective approach towards solving gender inequalities." (Radhika)
@letstalk.mentalhealth	"Mental Wellness Awareness Thought Provoking Content for Your Mind Not therapy" (Radhika)
@girlsbuildingempires	"Number 1 Community for Ambitious Women  Motivation & Education" (Radhika)
@projectnightfall	"This Instagram post spoke to my soul and I actually realised the horrifying magnitude of gender discrimination in general towards men. The fact that these go almost unnoticed just because men are the victim is so unjust and cruel." (Radhika)
@lgbtqiabangladesh	"This had been a rare account I'd stumbled upon and it was magnificent to see it grow." (Radhika)
@shethepeopletv	"Super inspiring platform for girls to believe in their dreams and fight against sexism. Current affairs and news relating to women and gender equality, South Asian based." (Radhika)
@asafeplaceinsideyourhead	"This account helps everyone with any kind of anxiety or depression feel a tad lil happier. Because alas mental health isn't something to hide." (Radhika)
@dlcanxiety	"Super-duper helpful account for people struggling with mental health, as the name suggests! 😊😊" (Radhika)
@thetatvaindia	"This account helps me to be updated about everything happening in my neighbouring countries." (Asif)
@thatdesifeminist	"An authentic Bangladeshi account from yours truly! They range from Islamic posts to social awareness to just memes." (Yusuf)
@baprebap	"Always posts stories about current events happening in Bangladesh and worldwide so it keeps me informed." (Yusuf)

Table 4: Instagram pages of interest to the participants

Radhika provided a lot of information about the Instagram pages that interest her. She relayed current affairs through the lens of social media. For example, she sent a series of Instagram posts which concerned a big news story in which the newly crowned Miss Bangladesh winner sexually harassed a male, and the insincerity of her public apology. Saima spoke about her surprise at Pakistan PM Imran Khan's comments on women's modesty and victim-blaming, which she learnt about through an Instagram post she sent me. Asif spoke about his interest in social media because traditional media (i.e. television and films) often hypersexualises and objectifies women, and so he can avoid it by curating his social media feed. Social media is thereby a crucial tool in young people's engagement not only with current affairs and debates but *how* they think about current affairs and debates.

Some participants felt compelled to engage with Stop Asian Hate and Black Lives Matter online movements:

"And even though there aren't people like that here at all. I still feel like it's the problem I have to tackle even though it's not my people." (Faisal)

Given the respective movements are about East Asian and Anti-Black racism, it is notable they are given credence by the participants from a country where not many East Asian and Black people reside. Yet, it must be noted that Anti-Blackness is very much entrenched in South Asian and Bengali cultures.

Participants spoke extensively about their social media presence as a form of public engagement with gender equality and feminism. Asif also spoke about social media as a platform to give more credibility to the growing issue of male body standards:

"Jokes making fun of boys' bodies have become so common that boys don't seem to be against them, instead they themselves join in, while I'm certain that a large majority of the girls around me would be very upset if they were subject to similar comments. I have been subject to these comments myself, but never thought much of them. But this whole thing has made me wonder if some other boys are actually hurt by these comments but suppress these feelings as a result of the comments becoming so normalised."

Social media is a place to give legitimacy to gender transgressions that would otherwise not be taken seriously as a gender equality norm. Rumena spoke about how, on Tik Tok, she often posts videos in

response to other peoples' videos, to explain why the original content is problematic. Rumena explains her reasoning for this:

"I try to do activism on Tik Tok, [but] since this is Bangladesh the people are very close-minded. And so sometimes if a person says something wrong, like you know slut shame someone or something like that, I would usually stitch the video²² and I'd be like, this is not okay. And this is why this is not okay."

To share content on Instagram or Tik Tok around feminist debates or in support of Black Lives Matter is considered by participants as 'doing activism' and 'raising awareness'. To an extent, it is based on a worldview that everyone is online and so can be reached in this way.

In an increasingly online world, social media is an invaluable platform for youth to not only exercise their voice about the injustices they feel they face and what they want to be changed but can listen and learn from their peers as well. Social media has nurtured the participants' political and social values, which they then share and see reflected in the content they follow. The value of recognising social media engagement as expressing 'voice' is that young people can purposefully share their critical perspectives on the social world. It is a space whereby they are not subject to the surveillance and restriction of the offline world that has limited their movements outside the home or put them under the watch of adult caregivers. Social media is a space in which young people feel freer to make choices in how they wish to challenge norms, including gender equality norms.

I explore social media as voice under the analytical lens that bridges agency, structuration, and norms. Where social media is a space to exercise voice for the participants, it is possible to relate this to structuration theory as they are experiencing 'enablement and/or constraint' which is affected by - and affects - their agentic actions. Explored in section 2.9.2 ('Structuration'), Structuration Theory poses that "social structures are constructed by actors who simultaneously both influence and are influenced by them" (Giddens 1984; cited in Ratinen and Lund, 2016, p.117), in which agency and structure are mutually reinforcing and dialectic. Social media is an enabling environment in which they have strategical agency to speak on their visions for gender equality norm change, even if this includes minutiae action of 'liking' posts that are transgressive to the views of the adults in their offline worlds. Social media is one of multiple, simultaneous environments that are enabling or constraining, which are constitutive of the broader structural forces they live within.

²² Repost the video with a video of herself, commenting.

4.8.2 Engaging with gender equality and women's empowerment outside online spaces

The study has also found participants exercise voice outside of the world of social media to share their gender equality norms. These actions mostly concerned an engagement with normative discourses on 'GEWE', and efforts to 'raise awareness' of these. In these examples – through participants' engagement in debates and feminist clubs in school – youth's agentic actions involve exercising voice to spread awareness or articulate their respective ideals.

One example is Radhika's online volunteering towards "raising awareness for disadvantaged rural artisans in Bangladesh", which she called a positive experience in connecting with other young people with similar interests. Radhika also spoke of signing an online petition towards improving LGBTQ+ rights in Bangladesh in a diary entry. Yusuf noted that he recognised the hypersexualisation of women in anime cartoons and has started speaking with friends about this. He suggested that he may make this a campaign to raise awareness in the future.

The participants who were enrolled in secondary English medium school all partake in their school's branch of Zonta club, a mixed-gender debate and awareness-raising club that organises around girls' empowerment and gender equality. Radhika noted their schools' Zonta Instagram page as core to their work during the pandemic, such as spreading awareness of menstruation stigma and the Stop Asian Hate global hashtag. All participants noted in one way or another that their involvement in Zonta was a means to 'change mindsets'. For example, Asif joined Zonta to denounce violence against women and, in his words, "for a bit of self-fulfilment", as to feel like he was trying to help as much as possible. Female participants noted no pushback or negative sentiments from school peers about their involvement in Zonta, only male friends who are uninterested in the cause. On the other hand, male participants said they have noted some pushback from male school peers but not female school peers for their involvement in Zonta and that "[for] girls, these boys accuse them of being snowflakes and being boring, they want to say slurs".

Other actions taken by participants include debate clubs. Radhika spoke at length about her various debate topics in her diaries, including the importance of being a 'girlboss' and the hijab ban in France. Radhika gave a detailed example of a debate club topic on women's participation in war:

“The last thing we [debated] was that women can participate in war just as men do... I was on the side that women should not fight in war. And the other side said that women should fight for breaking down the gender- or social norm about women not being able to do this. We said that there’ll be like a lot of problems if woman participated in, like, wars and there will be a lot of deaths because they don’t have as much power as men do. And on the side of women [participating in war] I think people find stronger because it is linked to equality of men and women, it will make sure women get their rights. And it will mean more manpower in the wars [according to the other side of the debate].”

These debate topics demonstrate embeddedness in a Muslim-centric liberal feminism around the integration of Muslim women within existing and unaltered systems of society, i.e. corporations (as ‘girlboss’) or the military (arguing equal participation in war). Such is an example of participant agentic action that diverges from altruism or decolonial feminism, to speak to normative gender equality values. In terms of motivations for club participation, participants both recognise clubs help with university applications and employability but also believed it hypocritical to partake in girls’ empowerment programming without believing in the cause.

Protik stated there is no unified discourse on gender equality amongst gender equality advocates in Bangladesh, and that some still believe in restrictive gender roles. Protik is involved as a youth representative for an INGO’s local partner, in which he does local media work towards improving media representations of women. He has noted pushback from the community about deconstructing gender roles but believes the INGO name brings legitimacy to the cause.

Following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the development industry, politicians, and activists worldwide have engaged in rhetoric that valorises listening to the voices of young people (James, 2007). Such framing is problematised by Parpart (2010, p.1) who writes on the emphasis on voice as an equivalency to agency:

“[It] is embedded in neoliberal assumptions that individuals who speak hard truths will be protected by international and national institutions devoted to democracy, freedom of speech and human rights.” (Parpart, 2010, p.1)

It is these ‘hard truths’ which lead to the hypervisibilisation of only the young people articulating stories which support white, liberal feminist logic and the singular pathway of ‘empowerment’, which

relates to the aforementioned arguments surrounding social accountability and *playing by the rules of the game*. And so, it is necessary to consider there is no one true authentic child voice. Not exercising a voice may be a necessity in certain contexts for navigating or challenging gender roles, such as clandestine sites as a safe space for LGBTQ+ communities. From this, voice is not a universally applicable youth agentic action in pursuit of gender equality norms.

As an attribute of self-determination in the face of imposed norms towards 'GEWE', voice remains a useful consideration. Youth can speak, and listen to their peers, about the injustices they feel they face and what they want to change. In articulating and sharing their 'gender equality norms', participants' agency comes at play in the exercising of voice because they are purposefully navigating their social networks and seeking out opportunities towards civic participation (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007) and bring about valued outcomes or achievements (Kabeer, 1999). The counternarratives they share may have the effect to change their circumstances and improve their capacity to have the resources and opportunities to make strategic decisions (Gilligan, 1982; cited in Parpart, 2010). Key to addressing RQ 2, voice is a tool for local self-framing and identity formation (Siffrinn and McGovern, 2019), which may be in contention with the norms imposed by their environments (e.g. set by parents) and the top-down imposing of youth to be 'change agents'.

4.9 Bangladeshi youth agentic action: Aspirations

Using the analytical lens, the participants' aspirations divulge a form of local-level agency in how they share their idealised gender equality norms and their capacity to imagine beyond current social norms. From my analysis, aspirations provide another means of exploring local-level gender equality norms. When a young person exercises their voice in pursuit of social change, they are articulating their personal and societal aspirations for an idealised future. The analytical lens to explore youth agency is useful to understand the purposeful rejection and adaption of social norms, shaped by their structural constraints and abilities.

By thinking in hopeful ways, as shown by the participants in this section, the human agent anticipates the potential for transformation, which is in itself enacting agency (Bryant and Ellard, 2015). The analysis found that young people experience much uncertainty over what they want for their futures and no participants were clear on a specific career path. Rather than having an idea of a career, the talk was about wanting to be happy. They stated this came in contention with parental pressure to pursue specific career paths and prioritising schoolwork to achieve this goal. This emphasis on

happiness sits in contention with literature on youth aspirations under neoliberalism. The importance of imagined 'futures' and aspirations by youth agency can be appropriated by the notion of youth 'potentiality', such as Koffman and Gill's (2013) example – in reference to girls only – in which youth in developing countries are 'entrepreneurial subjects in waiting'. 'Aspirations' under neoliberal discourses are co-opted as a means of fulfilling individualistic potential and ambition towards achieving personal and career goals and are thereby underpinned by an assumption that low individualistic achievement is due to low ambition (Best, 2017). Structural disadvantage becomes individualised, whereby social mobility is perceived to be achieved through attitudinal change (Spohrer et al., 2018). A lack of personal aspiration is used to suggest a failure of the human agent to imagine an improvement to their lives and to thereby act in pursuit of such goals. Such themes are apparent in Pimlott-Wilson's (2017) study of young people in the UK, which finds neoliberal governance that imbues young peoples' individualised responsibility for their future attainment results in emotional stress and anxiety for youth who cannot conform to neoliberal ideals.

That the participants emphasise their own happiness rather than, for example, career respectability or income, requires interrogation. Though studies by Spohrer et al. (2018) and Pimlott-Wilson's (2017) suggest a lack of personal aspiration as an indicator of disadvantage, this phenomenon may be a factor of social and financial privilege experienced by the participants, who may have the financial security to pursue whatever their passions may be. As well, these young people may be shifting toward prioritising their well-being and other interests, to cultivate an identity that exists outside of being a worker. This emphasis on personal happiness over career aspiration could, alternatively, be seen as an unintended agentic action in the face of the neoliberal market. In rejecting normative ideals based exclusively on careers, commodities, income, or material resources, the participants align with Robeyns' (2003) work on the Capability Approach that resources need not be converted into broader functionings. The participants have the freedom to make choices – a capability – beyond the neoliberal domain (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). As well, the participants do not speak to aspirations of being a leader or force for change in their futures. Such factors conflict with the normative constructions of young people as headstrong in their ambitions and desires to pursue goals toward being leaders in their communities.

There were discrepancies between girls' aspirations in comparison to boys' aspirations: girls' future career plans are more shaped by their parents than those of boys, and girls feel more pressure to know what career they will pursue. Participants felt mixed, according to their gender, when presented with the statement: "I feel like there is too much pressure on me to think about my future and how I

can create change". Through aspirations, the dynamic relationship between structure and agency comes to light in the proposed analytical lens. Perhaps, structure influences human agency, wherein dominant class or gender norms shape young people's aspirations. Social relations – which are embedded in gender and class norms – do not limit aspirations, but shape aspirations. This is not to say that structure and agency and aspirations hold fixed, one-way relations. Kenny et al. (2019) use Kabeer's (1999) notion of the 'capacity to define life goals and act upon them' about girls' agency. And so, youth agency concerns the duality of internal imagination and external conditions that allow goals to be achieved, such as social rules or access to knowledge. These findings on gender and aspirations demonstrate Huijsmans et al. (2021) conceptualisation of 'aspirations' as an orientation towards desired futures, that is embedded in youth's situated agency and structural constraints and the role of the future in young people's present lives.

Beyond individualised personal ambitions, aspirations demonstrate the participants envision broader societal change, a key factor of youth self-determination. Participants hoped that, in the future, there would be fewer expectations based on gender regarding careers and family life. They wanted to eliminate discrimination and hoped that people with "privilege to help those with less privilege", including "not treating everyone the same but recognising and not discriminating people based on differences, recognising different rights' needs" (Rumena). Rumena spoke extensively about the importance to reduce the stigma around mental health in Bangladeshi society. Other aspirations for society included more respect for youth opinions and at the same time less pressure on youth about their futures. And so, there is some reference by the participants to collectivised power shifts.

Table 5, below, is a representation of the participants' definitions for 'an equal society' where there is an emphasis on 'fairness' and 'opportunities'.

Participant Name	Participants' definition for equality
Radhika	not feeling the emptiness in being treated unfairly // a right people are entitled to have but the world does not give them //you feel contentment or satisfaction in being treated equally // a sense of fairness or justice // a power //less insecurity in rights // no discrimination between people
Yusuf	when society treats everyone equally so no one is left behind in poverty etc. // everyone has the same status of power // everyone is given the same chances as the others // society is built in a way so that everyone can relate with each other, and not think another person is higher/lower than them

Rumena	not just about discrimination or bias, but treatment // not distinction based on looks etc.// no effects on expectation or views of a person – only on things they have control over // equal opportunities based on factors out of your control
Protik	genderless society // same chance to participate, equal participation
Asif	“when I think of equality is that, first of all equal opportunities. So, there should be no opportunities, closed off to you, based on factors you cannot control, as in, like, your gender or your ethnicity, or your genetics, stuff like that” // Not being judged on looks or things they can’t control
Faisal	Everyone has the same starting point // you are judged on your character not on what you look like, like your gender or race
Saima	people learn and teach others // by social changes in community, you influence people // can apply to anything – humankind, animals, space // being treated fairly in community // they learn to change and to understand the concept of equality

Table 5: Participants' disaggregated responses for defining 'an equal society'

Participants aspire for equality and an equal society based on opportunities and treatment of one another, showing a liberalised understanding of inequality sitting only within attitudinal and behavioural norms. Though not shown in the participant responses, youth aspirations can capture personalised and pluralised visions of 'gender', 'feminism', or 'resistance' that go beyond or reject uncontested knowledge and rules embedded by the white, liberal episteme of the SDGs.

Asif believes that an equal society requires people to speak up on behalf of others:

“I don't think you should expect anyone else to do it if you feel like you're being treated unfairly, you have a sort of responsibility to deal with it yourself because there might be other people who are facing the same sort of unfairness, but maybe they don't have the courage or they don't feel like standing up for themselves.”

All participants agree 'if I thought my school is treating me unfairly because of my gender, it is my responsibility to demand for change'. And so, inequality is sought to be dealt with at an individual level. Asif then speaks about the importance of addressing inequality to untap potential:

“If we helped everyone who wasn't getting the opportunities for education, and just being able to sort of take advantage of their potential, I feel like that society would progress a lot more. Like kids in Africa, for example. If they're spending so much time just trying to stay alive, or getting water or food, and not being able to study, I feel like if they did have those opportunities to study or learn about the world, they could contribute a lot more towards society, and we would just have a better society in general.”

Asif plays into discourses of individualism and unlocking potential which are, as noted, key to the project of neoliberalism. By referring to ‘kids in Africa’, Asif participates in normative white-saviourist discourses that see inequality as a barrier to productivity. Such insights are indicative of the class and urban elitism of the participants, which ultimately shapes their views on social change. This demonstrates that Asif is playing into pre-existing norms around social change, rather than rejecting or adapting these norms.

The agency, structuration, and norms analytical lens is useful in understanding how Asif may have been shaped to enact agency in this way. Aspiration is a navigational capacity; the more privileged in society have a greater ability to map out their future with more realism, choices, and flexibility whilst the lesser privileged face a constricted navigational capacity in their aspirations for the future (Appadurai, 2004). This is a notable consideration given the socio-economic privilege of the participants. Aspirations exist in “doxic logics” (Huijsmans et al., 2021, p.5), in which dominant norms for human agents to aspire to are spread via human capital – by way of school, media, the market, and international development agendas – as part of populist-ideological mediations which seek to actualise pathways to ‘success’ in employment or wellbeing. These are tied up in broader cultural norms and presumptions about a good life and idealised society as well as patterns of change in social structures (Dejaeghere, 2018), e.g. rhetoric on addressing inequality to grow productivity.

Literature on norms and norm transgression is useful to frame young peoples’ affective consciousness and their orientation to the world as shaped by their social values (Romani, 2016) and personal gender equality norms. Participants’ gender equality values affect their social relationships and the spaces they chose to occupy and use voice, e.g. on social media and their participation in debate clubs. At the same time, the behaviour and values of actors are framed by structural constraints whilst simultaneously being constituted by these structural forces (Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015). The participants are also influenced by a global neoliberal system that has normalised individualism, thereby framing their pursuits towards individualised behaviour change regarding gender norms.

Regarding aspirations for society, participants had discrepancies between treating everyone the same or abolishing discrimination based on differences. On their own roles in the pursuit of social change, all participants generally felt able to change peers' minds on normative 'GEWE' issues, slightly less so for the adults in their families. The male participants had more confidence than female participants in their abilities to change the attitudes of people in their community, but overall, results were mixed across participants in referring to themselves as a force for change in their community. As an agentic action toward gender equality norms, there is value in analysing imaginations and aspirations to understand young people's intent of will in how social norms may be challenged or crossed. It demonstrates in what areas, and to what extent, young people are willing to be transgressive or reject pre-existing gender equality norms. Ideas around opportunities, being treated fairly, and discrimination seemed to have more standing than broader, institutional change, demonstrating their visions for gender equality give less weight to collectivised agency and empowerment.

A methodological focus on young people's aspirations regarding their adoption or resistance of 'gender equality' norms can signal how they may use creativity and ingenuity in these imaginations, and how they respond to social norm change they may see around them (Dejaeghere, 2018), and that these aspirations may transgress gender norms. An example of aspirations in their adoption or resistance of 'gender equality' could be that of more inclusive LGBTQ+ legal rights. The ability to imagine a personal vision of gender equality on a cultural and individual level is, however, not afforded to the most marginalised youth.

4.10 Alignments between international and local gender equality norms

This chapter proposes that international actors hold liberalised ideas of gender equality norms that overburden the individual's role in change. Youth agency at the local level is heterogenous across the participants, with some of their gender equality norms overlapping with the liberal politics of individualism in the SDG era. The participants support the vision of change held in the 'youth as agents of change' model, pertaining to the over-emphasis placed on interpersonal norms as the locus of gender inequality. Perhaps, such alignments can be attributed to their privileged socioeconomic status and education.

From my analysis of Bangladeshi youth, gender inequality is believed by the participants to be rooted in local forms of personhood and kinship (Hickel, 2014), such as the role of men in the household, and

normalising equally educated women in the workplace. Following this logic, it is the actions of individual citizens that are considered key to alleviating gender inequality. Thew (2018) argues that youth self-perception of their ability to participate in social change affects their enthusiasm for change in said area. It is in this way that the participants spoke mostly not about structural level changes, but about what they could change in the world around them. Perhaps, this is based on a somewhat simplified view of the status of gender and patriarchal power; a lack of understanding that young people need not be blamed for. All the participants learnt of these issues through their own self-education (by online means) or conversations with peers. And participants are still in a process of reflecting and self-educating, a process that is expanded upon in the following chapter (regarding critical consciousness).

To exercise voice is to affect one's circumstances and improve their capacity to have the resources and opportunities to make strategic decisions (Parpart, 2010). Yet, this study has shown embeddedness in a liberalised usage of voice as a means to an end, where awareness-raising in isolation is thought to effect change, from a neoliberal point of view (Dingo, 2018). Perhaps, this is integral to the considerations of youth agency, for too much burden should not be put on them.

The participants' aspirations about social values in the future too give importance to interpersonal norms in pursuit of gender equality norms, like development actors and youth-centric NGOs. The agentic practice of imagining futures gives an insight into their respective gender equality values; values that fall into the domain that considers inequality as a lack of access and opportunity for individuals. The participants aspire for a future in which individually held stereotypes are eradicated which, although not a problematic wish, fails to acknowledge institutions and systems that have caused financial and social inequalities. To explore human agents' aspirations for future social values as agentic action is relevant across the life stage. And so, this research subverts the usual 'age normativity' that applies to much of youth research (Huijsmans et al., 2021).

4.11 Misalignments between international and local gender equality norms

Yet, disparities in gender equality norms are found between development actors and youth, such as youths' uncertain personal futures, emphasis on the detrimental effect of gender norms on men and masculinities, and strong visions for improved LGBTQ+ rights.

In the narrative analysis, boys, young men and masculinities are mostly mentioned in texts as a disaggregated group of young people noted in the normative gender binarization of 'young women and young men' (OECD and ActionAid, 2015; IPPF, 2016). Elsewhere, they are held relative to girlhood, by comparing the socialisation of girlhood and boyhood into different gender roles (Save the Children, 2017, p.10; Girls Not Brides, 2018) including in GAGE's survey tool. In GAGE's survey tool there is a framing that still maintains a conceptualisation of gender underlined by biological essentialisms. As well, there is a lack of questioning around whether young people are privy to the overburdening of womanhood in gender equality dialogues and if hold their own criticisms over normative goals around gender equality.

For Girls Advocacy Alliance (2019) and Plan International UK (2019), where mentioned as a distinct group in their own right, young men and boys are considered for their role in the pursuit of 'gender equality' through means of reflection, training and peer dialogue. It is also noted young men and boys who are subject to abuse often perpetuate this in later life. It is an essentialised worldview based on ethnocentric universalisms, there are only heteronormative modes of being for young people imagined by many development actors. Male 'agents of change' can only be a certain vision of male who steers away from hegemonic masculinities. This is erasing any micro-transgressions against normative gender roles that are done by young people themselves, specifically young people in developing countries.

The young peoples' respective aspirations for their personal futures contend with the normative constructions of youth shown in Chapter Three, in which youth are assumed to be headstrong and assertive about their futures and career paths. The uncertainty about their ambitions may be indicative of various factors: their social and financial privilege to pursue their own interests; the cultural and generational factor in which community opinions do not factor into their career choices; and their emphasis on well-being and happiness. This remains an agentic action; to think of life beyond identifying themselves as workers is resistant to the neoliberal values of working life.

Youth are, however, headstrong in giving importance to LGBTQ+ rights and harmful masculinities. The young people put emphasis on the detrimental effect of gender norms on men and masculinities. The participants all talked about gender stereotypes and spoke hypothetically about how it should be acceptable for people to cross the boundaries of traditional gender performance. This was not an action that any of the participants themselves engage in, whereby their agentic actions consisted of speaking out in favour of this action. This is not to problematise the participants, but to acknowledge

their identities as heteronormative 'presenting', whilst engaging in the pursuit of gender equality. The desire to improve rights for LGBTQ+ people demonstrates the core difference in values between the participants and that of the SDG era. There is no way to answer *why* the young people hold such specific views differently from the SDG norms/'youth as agents of change' model, but these findings demonstrate that young people are a legitimate and heterogeneous epistemic group.

The everyday nature and minutiae of the participants' agentic practice of voice demonstrate that young people's ability to pursue social change is a continual process. This differs from the spectacularised and time-bound actions of advocacy or activism – implemented by simplistic funding increases or measured by quantifiable outcomes – that are embedded in normative 'youth as agents of change' rhetoric. The trivial nature that social media and the internet lends its credence as a pathway for youth agentic practice. Where Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) attribute access to information as the resources and capabilities to make strategic choices (Kabeer, 1999) to exercise agency, it is possible to relate this concept to the participants' lives. Social media provides a platform for young people to tactically use their voice and develop their opinions, where they would otherwise not have been able to do so in their offline lives with their families and communities. This is an example of how agency can be achieved in some aspects of life and not in others, thereby demonstrating the duality of participants' lives. Social media and the internet are vital in the agentic practice and values of young people in the pursuit of their own personal gender equality norms.

Misalignments can be found within international actors. In terms of NGO interviews, the interviewees give little emphasis to the SDGs, though there was a recognition of alignment with the overall agenda. It is notable, however, that the organisations cater to the same norms of the SDGs, such as an emphasis on individual-level 'gender norms' and a 'one-size-fits-all' model of development, which it is suggested to still allow for 'local expertise' (i.e. young people). For example, in Actor C there is little referral to the SDGs in this organisation, yet the interviewee noted the recognition of 'youth as agents of change' is core to the programme.

Another misalignment between international and local domains is exhibited by GAGE's research tools, which pertains to investigating the gender norms that young people live under, and not directly themes around young peoples' pursuit towards their own idealised gender norms. This is a misalignment by forgoing acknowledging that young people are impressed upon by external ideas of gender equality. Yet – turning to GAGE's data itself that represents locally held gender equality norms

– similarities can be found between GAGE's quantitative data and my study on Bangladeshi youth around gender equality norms being influenced by what other people (the community, parents) think.

This finding can be tied to GAGE's other research in Bangladesh. My participants have higher relative aspirations than those in the Sultan et al. (2021) GAGE study on youth in Dhaka's urban slums (discussed in 2.10.1), which is attributive to their realities of stable and better quality social, economic, and institutional services and infrastructures (Sultan et al., 2021). In their context, it is a given that they will finish secondary education, whereas this is an end goal in itself for participants in the Sultan et al. (2021) study. GAGE research finds rural youth or youth in urban slums give much emphasis to specific career aspirations and characteristics in their future marriages (Camfield et al., 2017; Sultan et al., 2021), likely due to financial pressures. Notably, the Dhaka urban affluent youth show a lack of definitive aspirations compared to those of lower socioeconomic status in GAGE's research. They think of life beyond career aspirations and identify themselves as workers, perhaps indicative of their financial and social security and *relative indifference* to community judgements (though it is still important).

4.12 Conclusions

In response to RQ 2 (Why do gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?), this chapter unpacks an essential component in 'youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms' by proposing the aligning and misaligning ideals of gender equality norms across international and local actors. In terms of alignments, international actors hold liberalised ideas of gender equality norms that overburden the individual's role in change. The participants' agentic action of aspiration is too shown to place over-emphasis on interpersonal norms as the locus of gender inequality, whereby participants aspire for a future in which stereotypes and lack of access and opportunity for individuals are eradicated as components of inequality.

This chapter finds misalignments in gender equality norms between development actors and youth. Disparities exist across youths' uncertain personal futures, emphasis on the detrimental effect of gender norms on men and masculinities, and strong visions for improved LGBTQ+ rights.

This chapter showed social media and the internet as vital in the agentic practice of *voice* in young people in the pursuit of their own personal gender equality norms. The participants navigate multiple contesting domains at one time – the online world, friendship groups, English medium schooling, and

parental and community values – which leads to complex sets of norms around social change and gender equality. It is for such reasons that the particular local gender equality norms of the participants both misalign and align with those of the international domain. Urban, affluent Dhaka youth who are engaged in heterogenous forms of activism could be simultaneously situated in norm cascading – by spreading popular emergent gender equality norms in their networks (such as LGBTQ+ values) – and in norm internalisation, in which they feel no need to negotiate the terms of gender equality norms, as these are accepted in their respective networks, e.g. women should be educated. And so, the findings from the participants do not outrightly resist popular gender equality norms, given their shared characteristics with white, liberal feminist epistemes.

It is this lack of nuance in understanding young peoples' realities in which international domains of the SDG era fail in the endeavour to be people-centric and position young people as 'agents of change'. In similar way, the participants hold little room for gender equality values that centre the needs of exploited women labourers, much like the national feminist organisations aligned with Bangladesh, furthering unsettling the global/local dichotomy in how norms are sprouted and popularised.

Yet, there remains some variation in the participants' practices and values around gender equality compared with that of the SDG era, representing the crux of this thesis: young people are valid gender-transgressive agents but not necessarily in the way that is imposed on them. Rather, young people have their own agentic practices and values around gender equality.

This chapter recognises the unique contributions of GAGE to this thesis, as both an evidence base on local-level experiences of gender norms in Bangladesh and as an international actor that frames this evidence. This thesis finds participants' views on gender norms are complementary to those found in GAGE's Baseline study in rural Bangladesh, whereby GAGE's participants followed the gender norms (and the negotiation of these gender norms) in line with what they believed the community held, instead their own idealised vision of gender norms and practices. The participants in this study give less weight to what the community thought of them than what is found in GAGE research, but they too are ultimately governed by the gender norms of the spaces and institutions that they occupy. This thesis presents a youth demographic in Bangladesh who are much less inflicted by community norms and expectations, likely as their financial status allows for less precarity in their social status. The everyday nature of participants' agentic actions in sharing their gender equality norms is prime for research from GAGE in understanding their agentic actions and disrupting homogenised representations of youth capacities, as is a key GAGE aim.

5 Chapter Five: Why does youth empowerment to pursue gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is the final empirical chapter to analyse youth agency in pursuit of gender equality in the SDG era (which is deconstructed into elements of youth attributes, gender equality norms, and theories of youth empowerment in social change). Attributes of youth and the idealised gender equality norms – explored in the preceding chapters – come together to frame how youth are situated in empowerment processes to develop their capacity to enact change. This chapter explores how youth empowerment is theorised within the gender norm change process. This chapter responds to RQ 3, which asks: Why does youth empowerment to pursue gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels? It will do so by 1) unpacking youth agency in processes of empowerment, as suggested in the ‘youth as agents of change’ model and 2) exploring GAGE’s critiques of the SDGs to meaningfully represent youth agency in empowerment and change processes. Then, this chapter will pose how youth empowerment processes in pursuit of gender equality are conceptualised at local levels by 3) exploring Bangladeshi youth views on social change and empowerment processes and 4) their development of critical consciousness as agentic practice. In analysing how these youth views align or misalign with development actor norms, this chapter provides a direct response to considering why international and local theories of youth empowerment are in misalignment.

This chapter presents findings from the narrative analysis and the interviews with youth-oriented NGO staff. Together, illustrative quotes from selected sources (from the narrative analysis) and data collected in the NGO interviews, juxtaposed with critical theoretical analysis, demonstrate some vast assumptions made about youth agency and empowerment in the ‘youth as agents of change’ model. Development actors’ conceptualisations of youth agency and youth empowerment demonstrate ‘youth as agents of change’ to be embedded in the politics of liberalism and individualism, whereby young peoples’ agency is sought to be developed through education towards critical thinking skills and creativity and supportive networks. Upon improving their agency, youths’ decision-making and actions are expected to be in line with the development actor’s needs.

This chapter assesses how GAGE envisions youth empowerment and roles in social change through how it critiques the SDGs. GAGE research finds the SDGs are insufficient in calling for action on youth and gender-related issues, whereby less than 8% of 232 SDG indicators are gender- and youth-specific (Guglielmi and Jones, 2019). GAGE's critiques of the SDGs do not extend to acknowledging its simplified, technical mode of categorising the social world and youth empowerment. There is limited ideological analysis from GAGE of how young people are imagined in social change processes.

This chapter then presents the young Bangladeshi participants' notions of how social change happens through personal and interpersonal means in a community, much of which can be attributed to external factors – such as media, peer influence, or education– or through individual self-reflection regarding their mindsets. Following, the participants' conceptualisations of empowerment paint a picture of the benefits an empowered person or group may contribute to society, using the grand language of popular development rhetoric about the capacity of an empowered person. These findings are the result of analysis from the Bangladeshi youth study, made up of interviews, image prompts, and a 14-day diary activity, and will answer RQ 3 in this chapter.

To further explore the extent to which participants' youth agency is reflective of development actor norms, this chapter argues critical consciousness is of importance to the young people's own perceived development of agency, empowerment, and to enact social change. They attributed their previous behaviours, values, and attitudes to not 'being educated or made aware' of social matters, and then actively seeking to educate themselves on the internet as well as to amplify these matters (i.e. via their personal social media accounts). This analysis is based upon the analytical lens for the heterogenous ways youth may enact their own gender equality visions, under prevailing gender equality norms (i.e. of the SDG era) (outlined in section 1.11.2 ('Agency, structuration, and norms in dialogue')). This lens provides an insight into how participants have formulated their values around social change and gender equality, and how they imagine challenging social norms in purposeful decision-making, through their critical consciousness development.

This chapter brings together the findings of the research phases to juxtapose these competing theories of youth empowerment to enact change, key to answering RQ 3. At international levels, 'empowerment' is about individual young people exercising choices that will contribute to broader social change. As well, the participants partake in discourse around youth agency that hypervisibilises people, based on their age, to be responsible agents to fulfil normative human rights and gender equality. Yet, the participants' agency complicates the assumptions built within the 'youth as agents

of change' model. Where resource access and knowledge are often thought to be the missing link in women's empowerment, it assumes women already have self-determination, critical consciousness and opportunities for decision-making. With the participants' credit critical consciousness as the instigator in their individualised (yet) transformative agentic action, this chapter argues there is a key difference in how agency and empowerment may be linked between development actor norms and that of affluent Bangladeshi youth. This chapter argues there is some disconnect between the international actors and the contextually-specific reality of social change as experienced by young people themselves. This is caused by development architecture's embeddedness in neoliberal politics of cost-efficiency and over-simplified solutions.

5.2 The 'youth as agents of change' model: Assumptions of youth agency and empowerment

This section discusses my analysis of how youth empowerment is imagined in the 'youth as agents of change' model, responding to the international component of RQ 3 (Why does youth empowerment to pursue gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?). The meanings behind 'empowerment' and 'agency' provide insight into the assumptions made about young people's ability to incite individual and collective change. 33 of 42 source materials included terms around 'empower(ment)' and 'agency'. Development actors' conceptualisations of youth agency and youth empowerment demonstrate 'youth as agents of change' to be embedded in the politics of liberalism and individualism, whereby youths' decision-making and actions are expected to be in line with the development actor's needs.

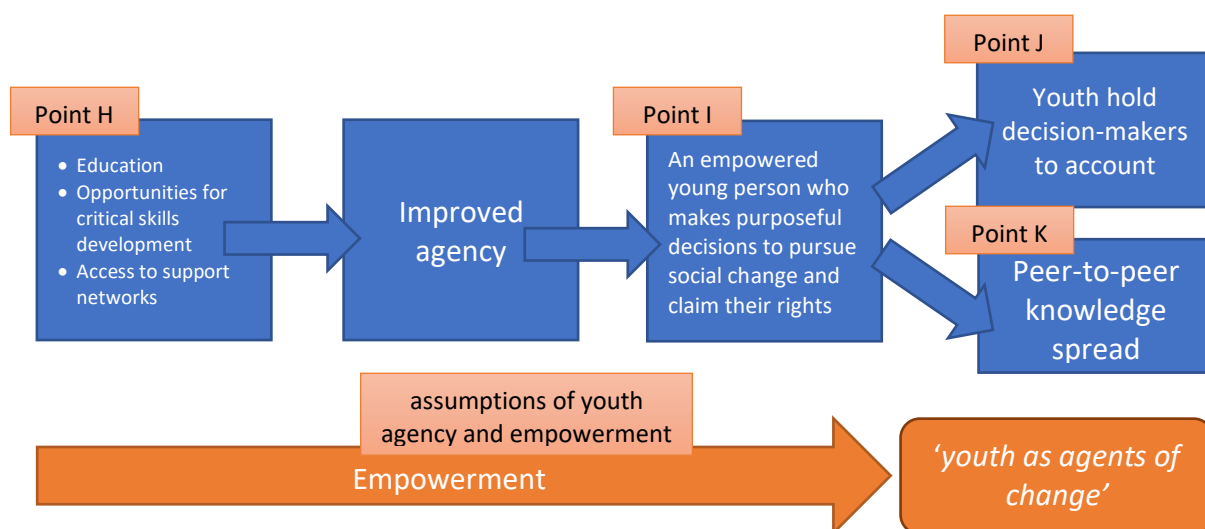


Figure 6: The 'youth as agents of change' model (author's own)

Point H in Figure 6 demonstrates how agency may be facilitated, according to development actors. Plan International's (2017) 'Champions of Change' programme delivers a curriculum for participants to learn about power and how to strengthen agency to "navigate power in their own lives" (p.11), by providing activities in pursuit of young peoples' attitudinal and behavioural change so that young people will "lead initiatives that transform unequal power relations and promote gender justice" (p.7). Young peoples' agency is sought to be developed through education towards critical thinking skills and creativity (Save the Children, 2017; UNICEF, 2019).

Themes around individual behavioural change are core to Actor C, particularly young people's emotional and social development. Participants in the programme are referred to as 'unusual suspects': young girls with low levels of well-being and who have not previously engaged in social action, often referred to by a youth worker or referral units. Programmatic activities give young people the opportunity to be exposed to different views and to understand how to express themselves, in a space where they can have a relationship with a trusted adult that is neither a parent nor a teacher. The programme aims to develop their capacity as civic participants and to build skills that they are going to need to navigate the world. Actor C bases their thinking on research which suggests that access to inspiring women, particularly in non-traditional gender roles, can have an impact on young people's limiting perceptions of themselves and their gender identity. The social action project of Actor C is referred to by the interviewee as a source of confidence and ownership for the young people, who learn that it is okay to fail. Implicit in this theory of change is that education and behavioural change is transformative of the participants' social positioning. It can be located in the 'youth as agents of change' model as Point H.

Organisations such as Development Alternative (2019) and UNICEF (2019) pose the development of young people's agency as a prerequisite for youth participation and being 'agents of change'. Agency is framed as the ability to do X action in pursuit of social change (OECD and ActionAid 2019;) and "claim their rights", tied up as capability for "power, choice, and agency" (ATHENA International, 2018, p.2), shown in Point I in Figure 6. DFID (2015) outlines that young people may 'build their agency' by being integrated into their programming throughout the design, delivery, monitoring, and evaluation processes. Their agency – or decision-making ability – is built around pursuing change in line with the development actor's needs and thereby embedded in the politics of inclusion.

Girls Not Brides (2018) frames 'empowerment' through means of increased access (i.e. to information) and opportunities to use 'voice' (ActionAid, 2019): "building skills, knowledge and access to support

networks that will help increase girls' decision-making abilities and access to opportunities, and peer support" (Girls Not Brides, 2018, p.18). Several organisations (OECD and ActionAid, 2015; Girls Not Brides, 2018) speak of what an 'empowered youth' can achieve: once 'empowered' these individuals lead the way for 'change', by making rights claims and holding decision-makers to account (see Point J, Figure 6, also elaborated in section 3.2 ('Youth homogenised as altruistic')). Girl Up, Rise Up (2019) speak about an 'empowered girl empowers another', proposing youth-initiated networks of empowerment in social or community circles (see Point K, Figure 6). Peer-to-peer learning is core in Actor C's programme, which relates to the same mantra around 'an empowered girl empowers another'. Many participants' social action campaigns are based on participants wanting to talk to younger girls about various issues: self-esteem and confidence; safe relationships; loving yourself; and spreading kindness. Point I – and subsequently Point J and K – articulates that young people's, particularly girls', familial and peer relationships are monitored and shaped to be spaces to incite change.

Where girls empower themselves and others through self-reliance and knowledge dissemination, it is the interventions of resource access that are thought to be the missing link in women's empowerment (i.e. Point H), thereby assuming girls already have the self-determination and opportunities for decision-making towards making purposeful change (Parpart, 2010) (i.e. Points J and K). This relates to the aforementioned erasure of a patriarchal analysis that acknowledges structural oppression. Where white, liberal feminisms propose specific sexual and gender norms in the construction of the idealised 'empowered woman' (Chant, 2016a; Cornwall et al., 2008), the empowered young 'agent of change' is coded as specifically Black and Brown young people (or girls) who carry out an imposed upon agenda or a linear pathway towards achieving mainstream development goals.

Women Deliver (2018) notes that young people must be 'empowered to make [rights] claims and to hold duty bearers to account', and so another assumed output of much youth-oriented programming is the fulfilment of normative child rights: Young people have the right to... "live free from violence" (Together for Girls, n.d.,p.4); "spaces to develop skills" (UN Women, 2014, p.3); "fulfil sexual and reproductive health needs" (IPPF, 2016, p.10); and "make informed choices about their body and life, and to participate as an active citizen" (UNFPA, 2019, p.7). DFID (2015) frames youths' 'access to their rights' as enabling more opportunities for better life choices and the fulfilment of their 'potential'. The recognition of 'youth as agents of change' is celebrated by development actors as the fulfilment of youth rights (IPPF, 2016), and the realisation of the values of the UN Committee on the Rights of the

Child, by “recognising [young people] as subjects of rights which are entitled to be heard and can participate in decision-making” (World Vision International, 2016, p.7).

When youth are engaged as ‘agents of change’ programming they are embedded in the politics of liberalism and individualism, particularly that of individual access; economic potential; employability; and expanded opportunities for decision-making, i.e. greater individual agency. The language around ‘potential’ found in this analysis speaks to the cost-efficiency of investing in the improved agency and empowerment of individual young people. They are instrumentalised to actualise social change via their interpersonal relationships and formal advocacy actions, akin to the ‘smart economics’ approach. It is their individualised empowerment, agency, and access to normative human rights given credence. The pursuit of improved agency and empowerment is based upon an enabling environment for girls (and youths) towards equitable access to “markets in land, labour and credit, as well as human capital and political institutions” (Roberts and Soederberg, 2012, p.953). This is outlined in Point H of Figure 6 (above), encapsulating that the young people who count as ‘agents of change’ are those held as symbols of neoliberal regimes.

5.3 GAGE: International critiques of youth agency in empowerment and change processes

GAGE holds a distinctive position in relation to other development actors. Found in the narrative analysis, most development actors accept the need for structural change in youth’s lives. GAGE, however, does not follow the liberalist ideology found in the ‘youth as agents of change’ model that insinuates young people’s agency is about empowering other young people or lobbying decision-makers. GAGE’s work on voice and agency diverges from individualistic politics that is embedded in the way that many development actors envision improved youth agency, empowerment, and ultimately what an agentic, empowered youth may do (i.e. an assumption of pursuing broader social change). GAGE’s conceptual framework recognises the complex interdependence of individual and collective youth voice and agency on a myriad of factors in young people’s lives and contexts. (GAGE Consortium, n.d.a)

There is, therefore, some ideological analysis from GAGE on how young people are empowered or situated in social change processes. GAGE recognises international development practice often foregoes examining how disadvantage is structurally embedded through local and global means, including within development processes itself. GAGE recognises youth capabilities are hindered in

development because of a lack of knowledge on their intersecting axes of vulnerability and a lack of consistency in the operationalisation of 'youth'/ 'adolescence'/ 'young people'. (Baird et al., 2021b)

GAGE publications recognise that the SDG framework does not adequately develop the educational, economic, and political capabilities of young people. GAGE's evidence base calls for nuance in youth's capacities to enact change: it argues a lack of nuanced data disaggregation in the SDGs has led to aggregating childhood and youth to be 'ages 5-17' despite "vastly different capacities, trajectories and development of a 5-year-old when compared to a 17-year-old, including regarding identifying and reporting experiences of violence" (GAGE Consortium, 2019, p.14). GAGE's critiques of the fact these gaps in youth empowerment and social change pertain mostly to the technocratic side, i.e. the homogenisation and erasure of youth across the SDG targets. GAGE does not bridge this critique with the SDGs' ideological failings. Their critique of the SDGs and development practice fails to acknowledge that the marginalised youth they are advocating for is negatively affected by growing cuts to international aid.

GAGE is in a contradictory position; stuck between a rock and a hard place. GAGE's criticisms of the SDGs' narrow targets and data monitoring guidelines represent a development actor both acknowledging the failings of the SDGs whilst working towards their success. GAGE is born out of UK Aid funding, which currently is systematically setting up and funding projects that are embedded in the white, liberal feminisms reflected in the SDGs. As established in section 1.3.1 ('The funding politics of GAGE'), UK Aid follows a homogenous way of viewing young people's lives that is not reflected in GAGE's research aims or strategies. There is contention in how GAGE utilises an intersectional lens in its research strategies, whereby its criticisms of youth's role/empowerment in the SDGs do not engage in its capitalist and colonialist ideological underpinnings.

The capitalist logic of the SDGs and neoliberal development funding bodies exist in a different ideological space to the conceptual holism that is embedded in GAGE's findings. Perhaps, bureaucracy and limited resources result in funding bodies only being able to accept evidence to support pre-existing funding priorities. As an evidence base, rather than an academic contribution, advocacy is not the primary function of GAGE. Where GAGE is primarily funded by UK Aid, such neoliberal funding bodies may only accept evidence to support their existing narratives. Funding and time limits dictate the scope at which development actors like GAGE may be able to draw together evidence towards a deeper, ideological critique of how youth are impacted by neoliberal development policies and practices.

GAGE sees its contribution to development policy and practice as filling conceptual and methodological gaps (around marginalised youth roles in change processes) oft present in such spaces. And so GAGE recognises that gaps exist and persist between the findings of development-actor research bodies like GAGE and governmental strategy (such as UK Aid) or in the SDGs. But it is *how* GAGE has critiqued the role of youth-led change in development knowledge that can be problematised in foregoing the recognition of aid withdrawal in such regions. As well, popular rhetoric that overburdens youth in change processes remains mostly unchallenged by GAGE. This analysis provides a nuanced understanding that international-level ideas of youth agency are limited by the gaps in development funding politics.

5.4 Bangladeshi youth views: How social change happens

This section will analyse Bangladeshi youth's views of how social change happens, views that have originated out of their own experience of change or what they have perceived in the world around them. These views provide insights into local-level understandings of how youth are situated in change processes and thereby contribute to answering RQ 3 (Why does youth empowerment to pursue gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?).

Participants believe that social change is hindered or slowed because of people's "mindsets": "change is hard because of mindsets". Simultaneously, there is optimism that, "despite people with old attitudes", change is still inevitable. Change in a group occurs from more openness and awareness of previously taboo subjects, social movements, and globalisations, according to Radhika. Faisal provides more means of change:

"Change happens through interaction with different people, environments, education, relationships, community, interests, media, foreign culture, global and government agendas".

Faisal attributes external influences for evoking social change. Similarly, Rumena notes that change can happen in a community when directed by the powerful. But ultimately, group change is dependent on how strong the norms are in the group, according to Asif.

Beyond external factors, Rumena notes internal means towards change: “a person recognising their mistakes and taking steps to rectify themselves and support others” (Rumena). Saima and Yusuf both attribute “personal experiences and technological innovations and globalisation” (Saima) as means of “getting rid of the Orthodox or toxic mindset” (Yusuf). A changed person is described as a person with changed attitudes, motivations (Asif), and mindsets with a different perspective on people and society (Yusuf) by multiple participants. They say that a changed person will speak up on issues more, and influence others to pursue social change (Faisal, Protik, Radhika).

Overall, participants are assertive about 'things' needing to be changed, and that they can communicate this with peers but not parents. The participants have unsure feelings about their own roles in achieving this beyond speaking with peers. Equally, they are unsure of the extent to which 'a global agenda to 'gender equality' is helpful in achieving it in my community'.

The participants share with the NGO interviewees (Actors, A, B, C) the importance of peer-to-peer learning in spreading social change and gender equality norms. Participants envision social change happens through personal and interpersonal means in a community, much of which can be attributed to external factors – such as media or education – or through individual self-reflection regarding their mindsets. The participants all imply that social change moves towards normative progressive values around inclusion and tolerance of differences and new ways of thinking. Such findings give insight into the importance of individualism for how the participants define social change processes.

5.5 Bangladeshi youth views: ‘Empowerment’

I asked participants about how they think of empowerment – what causes it, what does the process involve, who is empowered, etc – as to understand local ideas of youth empowerment to pursue change or gender equality norms. Though it is a complex, and subjective term, the participants were comfortable speaking about empowerment, likely due to their social media usage and engagement with feminisms (as stated in previous chapters). Participants' conceptualisations of empowerment, whether as a process or as an end outcome, were all relayed onto what it means to be an 'empowered person'. The word cloud below gives a visualised overview of the participants' shared semantic field concerning 'empowerment':



Figure 10: Participants' aggregate responses to defining 'Empowerment', visualised as a word cloud

Using the mind-mapping exercise outlined in section 1.5.4.3 ('Research methods'), participants responded to their definitions of 'empowerment'. I put together these aggregate responses into an online word cloud generator to create Figure 10, which is indicative of the kinds of words used to define empowerment.

For example, when Yusuf spoke about the process of empowerment, he noted it is when a person is "strengthened by society" to be "given more opportunities than they are likely to receive" and is thereby "[able to] think for themselves and are more independent". A slightly different view by Asif is that "you can be empowered even if you are not marginalised" as empowerment is about a change in perspective, in which a "woman is empowered if they are proud in their identity". Asif provided further explanation to this, that empowerment is about a change in views towards being more positive and having a sense of pride or power" about their identity and living situation. Moreover, participants noted that an empowered person pursues social change for others, because they can, upon empowerment: "speak their mind"; "have freedom to use their voice"; and "reach a broader community than their own" (Rumena). These comments came in the mind mapping exercise, when I asked for further clarification from Rumena, she said "[empowerment is] the freedom to speak your mind without rights taken away or be looked down for". This viewpoint can be explained by Radhika, who notes that an empowered person "[has] a sense of equality... is knowledgeable about inequalities.... and is aware of their rights and what they deserve". And because of these qualities, an

empowered person is “opinionated”, “confident”, and takes “a righteous approach” to “empower others, to address their insecurities”. Saima believes that, if a person is being oppressed, they will fight back and that this is irrespective of material prosperities.

Protik speaks to empowerment as the result of positive family support with access to "a good quality of education and resources to pursue interests". Upon being empowered, Protik believes people can bring change to their communities and empower other people, such as by raising their "voice against discrimination" and "confronting any wrong situation". These views complement the development actor narratives around empowerment as an individualised process that leads to the empowered individual both empowering themselves and others through self-reliance and knowledge dissemination. Much like the participants, emphasis is given to what the empowered individual can achieve 'after' the process of empowerment, rather than the inputs towards empowerment.

Together, the participants' views of empowerment paint a picture of the benefits an empowered person or group may bring to society. These themes are similar to those discussed in section 3.2 ('Youth homogenised as altruistic'), whereby empowered people are assumed to carry out an agenda of normative progressive politics. The participants complement the grand language used in popular development rhetoric about the capacity of an empowered person. In other words, the participants speak to the spectacularisation of young people, akin to the normative language around 'youth as agents of change'. Participants' visions of gender equality norms validate the specific norms around social change with injunctive norms around the responsibility to pursue change on the empowered, once-marginalised individual.

The participants all imply that social change moves towards normative progressive values around inclusion and tolerance of differences and new ways of thinking. In synthesis with their views on social change, there is little emphasis given to empowerment or social change occurring on a collective basis or through worker or class solidarity. Such findings give insight into the importance of individualism and the neoliberal subject for how the participants define social change and empowerment processes. Their idea of change sits across a chasm from marginalised, exploited poor and/or rural community change and empowerment sought through collective organising against a specific (capitalist) oppressor.

5.6 Bangladeshi youth agentic action: Critical consciousness development

From my analysis of the Bangladeshi youth, the participants' agency is demonstrated in their development of critical consciousness. This section gives insight into how critical consciousness is a means of agency as youth are reflecting on empowerment and social change, and how they have experienced these processes themselves. It thereby responds to the local aspect of RQ 3 (Why does youth empowerment to pursue gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?).

The development of critical consciousness is central to self-determination (Freire, 1976). Comprising critical consciousness is (a) critical reflection and analyses of inequalities and oppressions and (b) critical actions or participation in the pursuit of changing the social, economic and political conditions that imbue said inequalities and oppressions (Diemer and Li, 2011). Beyond an 'awareness' of inequalities, critical consciousness is a process that also involves problematising and taking 'critical' action against the mechanisms that marginalise populations (Freire, 1976). Choosing critical actions may be individual or collective actions towards evoking social change. Diemer and Li (2011) propose suggested critical actions such as community service, protest behaviour, or voting, and that to pursue critical actions entails 'socio-political control' or efficacy: "the perceived capacity to change social and political" (p.1815). In other words, critical consciousness involves a belief in the human agents' ability to participate in social change.

In the Bangladesh study, critical consciousness is shown to be of importance to the young people's understanding of their respective positionalities and their values. Participants all spoke of how their values and attitudes have changed – some completely oppositional – and the processes or events that led to this change in values. Participants cited various instances or processes as key in the formation of the social values they hold today, these include:

- Through social media, particularly Black Lives Matter coverage
- Recognising, or being conscious of, stereotypes (e.g. Faisal notes it is more feminine to cook)
- More awareness of struggles, seeing inequalities highlighted by the pandemic, and understanding their individual privilege
- Influence by older family members (Radhika's conversations with her cousins)
- Recognising past mistakes, such as the use of discriminatory slurs (Rumena's past use of slurs)

- Personal experiences, e.g. Asif joined the Zonta club because his female friends reacted very strongly and personally to high-profile news stories about violence against women. He recognised their mistrust of men and sought to rectify this.
- Natural maturation during the Covid-19 Pandemic (Yusuf)
- In their formal education, e.g. Protik's current university studies in Anthropology has led him to learn about social inequalities in Bangladesh.

These influences stretch Freire's theory somewhat. Critical consciousness, as defined by Freire (1976), is developed upon educational interventions ("active, dialogical educational programme" (p.45)) for marginalised people to reflect upon and challenge social inequity and imagine alternative ways of being (Campbell and MacPhail, 2002; Diemer and Li, 2011). In the study, however, formal education is one of the multiple inputs in young people's lives. I cite this 'change in values' as critical consciousness, because of the participants' internal retrospection concerning their previous behaviours, values, and lack of awareness of their respective 'privilege'. They attributed these behaviours, values, and attitudes to not 'being educated or made aware' of the matters, and then actively seeking to educate themselves on the internet as well as amplify these matters (i.e. via their personal social media accounts). Such a process relates to Kabeer's (1999) work on agency and empowerment, in which resources, agency, and opportunities do not automatically translate into empowered women, but lead to the development of critical consciousness and capacity to self-determine one's circumstances. In the case of the participants, they already had relatively high access to information through their schooling and internet access (compared with many other young people), but it was the development of awareness and retrospection that led to pursuing 'transformative agency' as called upon previously (Bertrand et al., 2017). This demonstrates the value of recognising critical consciousness development as agentic action.

Participants determine their own personal values in their respective internal journeys, which can go beyond top-down imposed norms. Notably, in speaking about their change in values, participants spoke to a shift from discriminatory behaviours towards values that are normatively held as progressive in liberal contexts (i.e. LGBTQ+ rights). Yet, critical consciousness will not imbue the same political ideology across human agents. Young people, as stated, are not a homogenous category but are comprised of various axes of marginality and identities, epistemological standpoints, and privileges. It is this heterogeneity, alongside contextual factors of schooling and media exposure, that will influence the extent to which youth can critically reflect.

Themes around socio-political efficacy²³ and critical actions are certainly relevant in the youth life stage, for young people will have developed the cognitive ability to recognise oppressive systems and articulate their worldviews (Potteat et al., 2020; Thew, 2018). The agency, structuration, and norms analytical lens is useful here for understanding young people's socio-political efficacy when taking critical actions. Perhaps, critical consciousness complements structuration theory, whereby it recognises the ability of human agents to make purposeful decisions to influence structure whilst structure imbues oppression onto the human agent. Critical consciousness becomes a tool or 'antidote' for marginalised people to overcome structural constraints on human agency. Social actions for young people involve "habits" of civic and extracurricular participation that will lead them to be more politically engaged in the future (via traditional forms of political participation, such as voting) (ibid). In this way, there is a positive relationship between psychological empowerment in critically reflecting on one's own circumstances, and real social, economic, and political changes in society (Campbell and MacPhail, 2002). Tyler et al. (2020) argue structural explanations for inequalities lead to the human agent pursuing critical actions toward societal change, not only internal change. In this way, where critical reflection is mostly based on endorsing structural explanations for inequalities, the critical thinker may ascribe to individualistic explanations for inequalities (ibid).

Regarding the Bangladeshi participants, most appear to hold individualistic explanations around 'awareness' and stereotyping' as integral to inequality. And so, their socio-political efficacy revolved around causing greater internal reflection through raising awareness. Internal retrospection is a bigger factor in critical consciousness development than the participants had suggested in their own theories of change. As a component of agentic action, 'critical consciousness development' provides insight into how participants have formulated their values around social change and gender equality, and how they imagine challenging social norms in purposeful decision-making.

Participants all spoke of how their values and attitudes have changed, some completely oppositional, and the processes or events that led to this change in values. The participants' experience with critical consciousness development is notable in comparison with alternative ways in which agency and empowerment are often interlinked and imagined in many development interventions, as mentioned earlier in the chapter. In the 'youth as agents of change' model, agency comes about through knowledge-building, access to support networks, and decision-making opportunities that lead to youth empowerment and finally the empowered agents' pursuit of broader social change. The participants' experiences blur this linear process somewhat, in that these attributes of empowerment

²³ Socio-political efficacy is defined by Potteat et al. (2020) as building ones of efficacy to challenge oppression.

and agency can come together simultaneously – critical consciousness development, further knowledge about power, and opportunities to speak on these platforms. It is more akin to the relationship described by Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) in which women collectively gain access to information, social inclusion and civic participation, and governmental accountability to have the resources and capabilities to become empowered to exercise agency.

5.7 Alignments between international and local theories of youth empowerment

This section is my synthesis of how international and local theories of youth empowerment align, from the ‘youth as agents of change’ model, to GAGE, to the Bangladeshi youth participants.

Established in the Literature Review (Chapter Two), ‘empowerment’ in the SDGs norms is based on the individual capacity of youth to exercise choices that will contribute to broader social change. Similar to the SDG framework, the predetermined norms of the development actors come at the detriment of including cultural pluralities and challenges to capitalism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity. Shown in the ‘youth as agents of change’ model, youth’s individualised empowerment, agency, and access to normative human rights are given credence by development actors. There is no discourse around collective action and power redistribution in the endeavour to ‘empower youth’. Across the SDGs and the development actors analysed in this study, individual young people are burdened to exercise choices that will contribute to broader social change, with little emphasis on collective action.

Within international levels, the narrative analysis set out to explore variations across different types of development actors regarding how youth are imagined to incite change towards the pursuit of ‘GEWE’. Of note, supranational organisations and the former UK Government Department for International Development are shown to employ less radical language than NGOs: they did not mention collectivised notions of empowerment but spoke more to ‘traditional gender norms’ and the politics of inclusion. (These findings complement the critical assessment of GAGE, which follows a politically neutral analysis of how young people are imagined in social change processes, likely owing to its funding from UK Aid). The study sought to identify nuances within the UN system yet has found that they all fit ideologically complementary ways of conceptualising ‘youth as agents of change’.

The participants partake in discourse around youth agency that hypervisibilises people, based on their age, to be responsible agents to fulfil normative human rights. The reality of the participants proved

their alignment with development actor norms on youth empowerment processes. Their educational and class privilege – along with the impact of social media pages that are popular within their social networks – has shaped their personal politics to be embedded in a politics of liberalism and individualism. The participants share the spectacularisation of the youth role in the SDG agenda – and development actor response, despite not seeing themselves as occupying this role. Though they share a collective feeling of adults not respecting their opinions, the participants do not feel like their age holds them back.

Here, it is necessary to turn to literature that questions the *'choice'* that is presented to 'youth agents of change' around social change, gender equality, women's empowerment or progress. This study has represented how it is pertinent to return to Wilson's (2008) interrogation of agency and empowerment under the neoliberal agenda. Where agency is fought on a complex site of changing material relations, structural constraints, and social norms, it cannot be decided that people's exercise of voice and agency is wholly co-opted by prevailing discourses, as to do so is to deny them agency (ibid). Dominant power relations can operate through the active choices made by the subordinated, who believe to be making choices that appear to be in the best interests of their needs and economic and social contexts (Kabeer, 1999). In this way, the participants' adherence to neoliberalism may stem from what they believe is 'the most progressive' choice, which also suits their structures of class and educational privilege.

5.8 Misalignments between international and local theories of youth empowerment

From the findings in this chapter, misalignments can be found between international and local theories of youth empowerment. This section contributes to a response to why alignments and misalignments persist in theories of youth empowerment in the change process.

Themes of capitalist and colonial logic that were embedded in the SDGs themselves are also relevant in the international domain in which 'youth as agents of change' exists. As well, it exists in the way that GAGE critiques of the SDGs cannot extend beyond the technocratic domain of metricism to acknowledge its ideological failings, due to evidence priorities of its funding body, UK Aid. GAGE's evidence is unlikely to dismantle the instrumentalization of girlhood in UK Aid priorities on girls' education. GAGE is a key case study as it demonstrates that the disjuncture between international and local goes unchallenged because of development funding politics. As such misalignments between the local and international domains around youth agency persist. Perhaps, this funding politics

extends to many of the large-scale development actors mentioned in this study, that are accountable to similar funding bodies (or UK Aid itself) and thereby required to utilise narratives of cost efficiency and investment in their programming and policy. To explore this is, however, beyond the remit of this thesis.

The participants' agency complicates the assumptions built within many development interventions around empowerment that are based on resource access and knowledge. In particular, referring back to the normative role for youth engagement with politics in section 3.3 – wherein Actors A, B, and C all spoke to youth-led campaigns – change and youth empowerment is sought to be initiated by training and capacity-building of young people to own and deliver campaigns. Rather, the participants' transformative agentic action originated from the development of critical consciousness, demonstrating the differences in how agency and empowerment may be linked between generalised youth empowerment (to pursue gender equality) processes and that of affluent Bangladeshi youth.

Young people's critical consciousness is tied to their agency as:

“Agency and empowerment can provide the ground from which to think strategically about how to live productively in the spaces youth occupy or to transform those spaces for the common good.” (Greene, Burke, and McKenna, 2013, p.315)

The development of critical consciousness is core to the participants, as they all outlined a personal process in which they reflected inwardly, resulting in changed values towards recognising social inequalities. It is in this process that the young people educated themselves and began taking actions towards pursuing social change that they deemed necessary and capable within their means. The participants' self-education has resulted in both overlapping and contrasting gender equality norms with the SDGs. For example, LGBTQ+ rights and youth mental health are key issues for the young people, which are overlooked by the SDGs.

Critical consciousness is tied to the participants' usage of their voice and ability to imagine alternative futures, which led to their contending with the norms of their household. At the same time, the participants emphasise the politics of individualism and behavioural change more than the need for systemic change in inequalities, akin to the SDG agenda.

Critical consciousness could, potentially, be an analytical tool for how (other) youth may use their voice, or take critical action against, the power structure of white, hetero-patriarchy (Greene, Burke and McKenna, 2013). This research determined that, to the participants, their critical consciousness problematised social inequalities, stereotypes, and racism as key areas. Here – despite their ideological embeddedness in liberal feminisms – the participants set the terms of their own vision of gender equality: one that is inclusive of LGBTQ+ people and pursues agentic actions towards popularising Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate; movements with core themes that are wholly erased in normative development practice. Conversations with parents or engagement with online communities are an alternative to the formalised and professionalised spaces of resistance that are already in place for young people by NGOs.

5.9 Conclusions

This chapter has provided an answer to RQ 3, which asks: Why does youth empowerment to pursue gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels? International-level ideas around empowerment and agency are misaligned with the participants' agency and empowerment in change processes. This chapter has found the development interventions assume the agent already has self-determination, critical consciousness and opportunities for decision-making, with resource access and knowledge as the missing link in women's empowerment. The participants' transformative agentic action was initiated by the development of critical consciousness. This shows the differences in how agency and empowerment may be linked between generalised women's empowerment and that of affluent Bangladeshi youth.

The 'youth as agents of change' norm suggests young people shift or replace injunctive norms around, for example, valuing girls' education to delay marriage and childbearing (Nguyen et al., 2019). The findings of the Bangladeshi youth study put forward that youth resistance to predetermined norms includes not as far as a rejection of the overall norm, but an adaptation of the norms in light of the strategic needs of the human agent. Participants navigate the norms they were brought up with through their critical consciousness development, and it shapes the way they imagine social change processes occur, which is at the individual level through internal retrospection. It is in this way that participants emphasise the politics of individualism and behavioural change more than the need for systemic change in inequalities, akin to the SDG agenda.

Evidence from this chapter puts together an argument for why a disconnect between the international and local domains persists. The 'youth as agents of change' model, and the broader SDG era, instrumentalise youth to actualise social change via their interpersonal relationships and formal advocacy actions based on an oversimplification of social change and as a means of cost-efficiency. In this way, there is little consideration for the role of structural constraint in young people's lives. The findings of this chapter suggest the participants' agentic actions towards gender equality as akin to gender dissidence, a more complicated vision of social change.

Based on youth empowerment to pursue change, this chapter has put forward the final component in this thesis' investigation of youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms, following attributes of youth (Chapter Three) and gender equality norms (Chapter Four). Across the empirical chapters, I found the participants' agentic action is comprised of voice, critical consciousness, navigating parental relationships, and aspirations; components that may differ for different groups of young people. This research presents the fluidity and liminality of the participants' personal politics (Bastien, 2017), putting forward a more subtle and nuanced depiction of *some* young people who are pursuing action toward their respective vision of gender equality. Young people are not inherently progressive, as is suggested in much development rhetoric (and found in Chapter Three). Rather, young people have their own histories in which their opinions have been subject to change and influence through multiple factors. This is exemplified by some of the participants who regret their past lack of awareness of issues of race and feminism.

The research demonstrates the realistic capabilities of *some* young people, and that they are dynamic and continually changing human agents with life histories who react in different ways to new information; a concept that is largely missing in today's development discourse around youth. This chapter – and thesis as a whole – has drawn from this to present that such considerations are essential for a longitudinal research programme such as GAGE. GAGE navigates the restrictions of its funding politics to generate data that counters popular representations of youth to give a nuanced depiction of young people and their agency, at the very least.

6 Chapter Six: Conclusions

This chapter offers final reflections on the key findings of the study. The chapter notes the main contributions of the thesis, and its place within broader existing research on youth agency and gender equality norms. This comes with acknowledgement of the research limitations, with considerations for how these criticisms may be mitigated. I also provide a discussion of the thesis' implications for further research and practice, and my own reflections on the thesis journey.

6.1 Key Findings of the Study

This section synthesises the responses to RQs across the empirical chapters which concern how youth are attributed, idealised gender equality norms, and the process of youth empowerment to enact change. This synthesis explores how youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms is conceptualised at international and local levels, respectively, to then propose why these ideas misalign.

6.1.1 Youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms: International-level findings

The literature review proposed the SDGs as a set of norms and the embeddedness of these norms in capitalist and colonialist logic. Through these themes, the SDGs justify preserving the tools of structural inequality that uphold patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and capitalist extraction. These were useful insights into recognising the instrumentalisation of youth agency to fulfil empty ideas of 'GEWE'. This thesis draws from the criticisms given by feminist theory onto how the development industry overburdened and racialised womanhoods to analyse youth agency as imagined in the SDG textual framework, insights which found 1) a politics of inclusion and individualism and 2) girlhoods are spectacularised and overburdened with the pursuit of gender equality. These two themes are crucial in recognising *why* the SDG era of development actors position youth in particular ways, found in the empirical chapters. The apparently gender-neutral 'youth as agents of change' is coded as female, based on the liberal feminist politics of inclusion and white normativity.

Foundational in the literature review is that the construction of youth agency differs across international and local domains. The SDGs' norms about gender equality and youth agency are dynamic and constantly in processes of translation by receiving actors. In the SDG era, the translated

norms have not all travelled 'down' from the SDGs directly, but come from the vicinity of said norms, i.e. the already hypervisible role of youth in development. And so, it was pertinent to identify the development actors as part of the SDG era, who can be directly informed by the SDG agenda, influenced by donors who are motivated by trendy thematic priorities of the SDGs, or have informed the SDG agenda-setting process themselves.

This thesis contributes the 'youth as agents of change' model as a conceptual framework to demonstrate the homogeneity in how youth agency to pursue gender equality norms are imagined – based on the findings of the narrative analysis and NGO interviews. The 'youth as agents of change' model is comprised of 4 core themes: 1) the global population of youth as altruistic; 2) a normative role for youth engagement; 3) gender inequality lies in interpersonal norms; and 4) liberalised notions of empowerment or agency to invoke broader social impacts. The four themes are interdependent in the way that they comprise the expectations of how youth agency is embedded in how change is expected to happen. The value of the NGO interviews, across the UK and Bangladesh, served to highlight the similarity and palpability of the 'youth as agents of change' narrative across geographic sites. The purpose of exploring the narratives and assumptions in the construction of youth at the international level in this way "demonstrate[s] how NGOisation does not only affect large-scale processes but is also embroiled in intimate subject-making affecting young people's gendered subjectivities and everyday mobilities" (Romani, 2016, p.377).

Together, these themes suggest that 'youth as agents of change' is a representation of liberalised politics of inclusion and representation in which young people are trained to be fit-for-purpose instruments that improve the efficiency of development programming in the SDG era. Framed as youth 'activism', there is an irony that such a theory of change can only lead to a superficial level of change in the development industry.

Where the four components of the model indicate embeddedness in white, liberal feminisms, it can be taken that in the construction of 'youth as agents of change', development actors have collectively imagined a racialised 'young girl agent of change', akin to Mohanty's (1984) 'Third World Woman'. As found in **Chapter Three on attributes of youth**, she is the altruistic natural leader and hypervisibilised symbol of youth, whose everyday life has been spectacularised under their white gaze. UK Aid – as delivered by the FCDO – serves as a specific example of setting up the racialised 'young girl agent of change' as an indirect justification for cuts in aid expenditure, indicating the symbolism of girlhoods in cost-efficient development. The racialised 'young girl agent of change' is surveyed to pursue

activism or spread awareness to espouse the normative values towards 'Sustainable Development' and 'gender equality'. She lives in a context in which gender norms are the locus of inequality, as established in **Chapter Four**. The racialised 'young girl agent of change' is urged to partake in formalised development and play the rules of the game for the benefit of development efficiency, rather than for their desire to improve their own lives. And so, as an empowered youth, she will inherently pursue actions that lead to broader social change and empower others (found in **Chapter Five**). This is based on elitist assumptions that forego recognition of time- and resource-poor youth. The Black and Brown boy is welcome to partake as a 'young agent of change' too, but his involvement is not as valued unless it is to only recognise 'global south' masculinities as problematic in juxtaposition to girlhoods, rather than to deconstruct the colonial gender binary itself.

'Youth as agents of change' gives light on what conditions the 'global south' becomes relevant under the colonialist norms of the SDGs; this relevancy is the hypervisibility of the Black and Brown girl of the 'global south'. Black and Brown girls of the 'global south' are generally posed in recent development thinking to be "potentially ideal agents of development awaiting empowerment" (Wilson, 2019, p.1664). This is a framing similar to the 'Third World Woman'. The 'Third World Woman' however, was posed as having very little agency to enact social change through advocacy and knowledge spread, whereas the 'girl agent of change' is awarded the assumption that they are willing and able to make such purposeful actions.

'Youth as agents of change' rhetoric is a form of coloniality: it erases 'Others', and/or homogenises vast populations of people, and ways of thinking and experiencing the world; imposes norms to govern people's values, behaviours, and actions; and obscures the racist capitalist heteropatriarchy as the root of global inequalities. Under 'youth as agents of change', youths are stripped of their agency to act on their personal, professional, and cultural aspirations in place of imported Western-centric pre-determined norms 'GEWE' (Kothari, 2005). In the name of co-production, emphasis on civic participation and big data in the effort to *Leave No One Behind* forcibly includes all people to be involved in the framework's neoliberal agenda, much like the global economic market itself. By specifically calling upon youth to partake in formal modes of advocacy, O'Malley and Johnson's (2018) NGOisation of resistance comes into play. 'Youth as agents of change' is about having a *seat at the table*, rather than pursuing change through dissonance or disrupting the rules of the game. There is no room for young people to transgress 'gender norms' in their own way, or not at all. Youth agency to pursue change becomes a prescribed norm in the SDG era, thereby misunderstanding a

fundamental aspect of youth agency as the self-determination and capacity to imagine a future on their own terms.

My analysis of how youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms is conceptualised at the international level has been grounded in a lens that is critical of the white, liberal feminisms in development (Switzer, 2013; Desai, 2016; and Prügl, 2017). The values and assumptions tied up in 'youth as agents of change' rhetoric are a follow-up, or re-packaging, of various dominant gender equality and development paradigms shown in the Woman in Development era and the 'smart economics' approach (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). The over-inclusion of 'girls' is based on recognising young women as a site of change because they are a good investment to create maximum change. In the SDG era, development actors – including the UK FCDO – directly or indirectly employ 'youth as agents of change' as a means to forego a recognition of deeper, structural modes of gender, social, or class inequality.

The 'youth as agents of change' model visualises the process in which the agency of young people is an ingredient towards young people's empowerment and ultimately their ability to do particular actions that comprise being an 'agent of change'. The 'youth as agents of change' model follows a capitalist logic by speaking to young people's 'unleashed potential'; rooted in neoclassical ideas of productivity. In the pursuit of 'GEWE', 'youth as agents of change' justifies development policy and programming that focuses on individual or community-level traditional and cultural norms, thereby supporting their case to burden the pursuit of social change onto average citizens, i.e. young people and the Black and Brown girl of the 'global south'. Girls, as the locus of 'youth as agents of change', are subjugated based on assumptions around their imagined futures; assumptions that tie the responsibility for change onto the young and the female. The undefined and unknown that comes with 'potential' is what leads it to be co-opted by discourses of empowerment and saviourism. Young people's futures are co-opted by white, liberal feminist narratives of what their future and wider society should look like, in which youth could become cogs in the system to enact a predetermined vision of change that may not be in the interest of – or accessible to – the most marginalised youths. The 'youth as agents of change' model is an insightful conceptual framework which recognises how youth agency has been conceptualised to fit an imposed notion of active citizenship and the fulfilment of normative human rights.

In the SDG era, development agency narratives have homogenised the contribution of youth in development towards the imagined 'youths as agents of change'. 'Youth as agents of change' appears

to have little difference in its constructions between documents that regard direct action towards the SDGs and those that do not. This analysis has captured that ‘youth as agents of change’ exists under similar narratives both within and outside the remits of the SDGs, which demonstrates the pervasiveness of the narrative. This indicates the merit of an approach to studying cross-agency narratives, as to capture the same narratives that exist outside of the framework and demonstrate the pervasiveness of the narrative.

GAGE critiques of the SDGs cannot extend beyond the technocratic domain of metricism to acknowledge its ideological failings, due to evidence priorities of its funding body, UK Aid. Overall, GAGE differs from many development actors in how youth are represented, as GAGE’s research demonstrates gender equality norms are situationally specific and the variability of gender norms in a given community.

6.1.2 Youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms: Local-level findings

The research activities with Bangladeshi young people were key to understanding their own ideas of gender equality norms, their agentic actions towards said norms, and the ways in which local ideas of youth agency may misalign with those conceptualised at the international level.

Participants’ views mostly overlap with the domain of white, liberal feminisms, particularly the importance given to interpersonal gender norms, the politics of individualism, altruism of youth, and the role of peer-to-peer awareness-raising in social change. They notably align with the ideologies of national feminist organisations in Bangladesh that are framed by the elite women, which ignore the demands of local, grassroots women worker unions. In this way, local ideas of gender equality in Bangladesh are indeed heterogenous and contextually-specific.

Found in **Chapter Three**, the participants suggested they believe they have the correct values to partake in change, as their values were embedded in modernity, class privilege, and Western ethnocentrism. They codify online materials as inherently distant and global despite their Bangladeshi origins, and so the participants’ share in the white, liberal feminist false dichotomisation of the global ‘progressive’ domain versus local ‘traditionalism’. The participants’ educational and class privilege and online lives have shaped their personal politics to be embedded in a politics of liberalism and individualism.

The participants share the spectacularisation of the youth role in the SDG era, despite not seeing themselves as occupying this role and the mundanity of their own transgressions of gender norms. They also do not explicitly code the role of youth in change to mean female-coded characteristics. Credence should be given to the ways that participants' gender equality views go beyond the remit of the SDGs' norms (established in **Chapter Four**), given all participants highlight LGBTQ+ rights despite their invisibility in much development rhetoric. Another divergence in how some young people resist SDG era 'youth agency' and the 'youth as agents of change' model is their indifference around formal, civic youth participation in governance structures, which is given such high importance in the 'youth as agents of change' model as *playing by the rules of the game*. Mostly, participants' ideas of empowerment and social change are based on what the empowered individual can achieve 'after' the process of empowerment, rather than the inputs towards empowerment, as found in **Chapter Five**. Where many young people – including those I interviewed – have no reason to follow SDG progress or development rhetoric, the findings suggest the SDGs are not too important to the particular group of young people I interviewed.

This thesis has offered up an analytical lens that recognises agency, structuration, and norms sit together in dialogue to comprise youth agentic action towards their respective ideas of gender equality. This is a lens onto the data to identify how young people may envision or enact their (local) ideas of youth agency. Agentic actions for other groups of young people would likely be comprised of different components, but the agentic practices outlined in this thesis are specific to the participants: through critical consciousness development; expressing voice; aspirations; and navigating parental relationships. Such values and practices are *agentic*, whereby they are demonstrable of the role of recognising structuration in human agents challenging social norms. This is the self-determination of their own norms around gender equality. In this way, this analytical lens thereby distinctly recognises youth agency on gender equality, *under prevailing imposed norms*.

Literature on agency, structuration, and norms together demonstrate youth agentic actions towards 'GEWE' are embedded across the social world: through informal, interpersonal means that can be intentional or unintentional (conversations with peers); to formal, or organised, purposeful forms of activism (i.e. social media posts). Their ability to pursue social change is a continual process of navigating structural constraints. This differs from normative 'youth as agents of change' rhetoric that spectacularises time-bound actions of advocacy or activism, implemented by simplistic funding increases or measured by quantifiable outcomes. There is a delicate balance between recognising

young people's agency to pursue change and not overburdening them with imposed gender equality norms.

The literature on agency offers up various competing and complementing ways in which to theorise agency. This has been useful in demonstrating that there are multiple ways in which the participants practice agency: from tactical agency to transformative, purposeful agency in pursuit of social change. These are, however, not strictly definable or identifiable. Participants' agency supports the Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson (2015) idea that agency is subjective and multidimensional, as well as Conradie's (2013) argument that agentic action comprises not only grandiose outcomes in social change ("that changes in women's lives cannot easily be captured by 'functionings achieved' but rather they are reflected in small but daily thoughts and behaviours" (Conradie, 2013; cited in Dejaeghere, 2018, p.241)).

The proposed analytical lens of this thesis is useful to recognise to what extent and in what ways may youth pursue alternative actions and epistemologies in how they adopt, adapt, and/or resist the values of the SDG that they are assumed to be naturally in favour of. By theorising youth agency in resistance or adaptation to predetermined norms, young people are recognised to be active agents that are situated in global processes of structural inequality. The variation in the participants' practices and values around gender equality from that of the SDG era is the crux of this thesis: young people are valid gender-transgressive agents but not necessarily in the way that is imposed on them. Rather, young people have their own agentic practices and values around gender equality.

This analytical lens contributes insights into the minutiae and everyday nature of youth agency in the affluent, urban Bangladeshi context, which is in contention with the spectacularisation and hypervisibility of girlhoods in the 'youth as agents of change' model. The findings of the Bangladeshi youth study put forward that youth resistance to predetermined gender equality norms includes not as far as a rejection of the overall norm, but an adaptation of the norms in light of the strategic needs of the human agent. The agency-structuration-norms lens serves to put forward the sporadic possibilities for growth (in consciousness and actions) and the more subtle, forms, nuances, and questions and workings of power (Hayhurst, 2013). Ortner (1995) classes the refusal of subjectification or to "occupy the category being fostered upon" – in this case of being 'agents of changing gender norms' – as appropriate enough of an act of resistance. The relationship between domination and resistance is not dichotomous, but more blurred (Ortner, 1995).

Rather than grandiose assumptions of ‘youth as agents of chang[ing] gender norms’, the findings suggest the participants’ agentic actions towards gender equality as akin to gender dissidence. The ‘empowered’ participants are not creating new gender roles and responsibilities (i.e. injunctive norms) but are participating in setting a new acceptable standard for ‘traditional’ gender roles or conduct, the process of *norm relaxing* (Marcus and Harper, 2014). They are crossing the boundaries of gender norms to produce their own gender equality norms (Ortner, 1995). Given the participants are living within, and shaped by, the constraints of their structure (the SDG era, social media norms, parents), they are not redefining new gender norms or practices. Perhaps, the ‘youth as agents of change’ model, and the broader SDG era, make little consideration for the role of structural constraint in young people’s lives or in situating the young agent in the neoliberal domain of the SDG era. It is the lack of nuance in understanding young peoples’ realities in which the SDGs fail in their endeavour to be people-centric and position young people as agents of change.

The participants themselves navigate multiple contesting domains at one time – the online world, friendship groups, English medium schooling, and parental and community values – which leads to complex sets of norms around social change and gender equality. Social media is a crucial platform for the agentic practice and values of affluent Bangladeshi young people, whereby they develop their critical consciousness and can use their voice, where they would otherwise not have been able to do so. Given agency can be achieved in some aspects of life and not in others, this is particularly relevant to the duality of participants’ lives. These young people publicly present their gender equality values on their social media but must act tactically when presenting this in their offline lives with their families and communities. The participants navigate two worlds: a mostly online world about transnational anti-racist and feminist movements; and an offline world of older community members opposed to such issues. Structuration theory is supported by this aspect of participants’ lives. As the participants are simultaneously traversing the enabling environment of social media to voice their gender equality visions, whilst navigating voicing these same visions in their more constraining offline world with their parents and community.

This thesis presents the case for giving more space to the digital lives of young people and the media that they consume, and their reflections on the normative ideas of ‘gender’ and ‘gender equality’ norms that they see around them. The participants adopt or resist these norms to better suit their needs and subvert the hypervisible role of the ‘youth activist’ (with a seat at the table etc.). This, theoretically, can lend itself to demonstrating self-determination in opposition to the neoliberal logic behind the SDGs. These findings demonstrate the positives of youth lives from their proud

accomplishments in social media activism to satisfaction in being able to debate with their parents; a phenomenon that is often eclipsed in much development work.

6.1.3 Why are international and local ideas of youth agency in misalignment?

In response to RQ 1 (Why do attributes of youth align and misalign across international and local levels?), I found international actors frame youth as racialised and spectacularised under the pedantic gaze of white, liberal feminisms. This misaligns with the young people in this study that reject seeing themselves in this light and the reality of their agentic action in navigating more everyday relationships.

In response to RQ 2 (Why do gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?), I found international actors hold liberalised ideas of gender equality norms that overburden the individual's role in change. Youth agency at the local level of my participants' context values norms around LGBTQ+ rights and masculinities that are erased in the SDGs. They tactically use their online personas to voice more transgressive gender equality norms than what is expected of them (by parents) and in a more mundane everyday way of sharing gender equality norms than is presumed by international actors.

In response to RQ 3 (Why does youth empowerment to pursue gender equality norms align and misalign across international and local levels?), I found development architecture's embeddedness in neoliberal politics of cost-efficiency and over-simplified solutions overlooks the way that social change is experienced by young people like the young participants of this study. The participants credit critical consciousness as the instigator in their transformative agentic action to pursue change. Yet, development actor norms assume the agent already has the self-determination, critical consciousness and opportunities for decision-making, with resource access and knowledge as the assumed missing link in women's empowerment.

Synthesising the responses to the RQs, development actors' assumptions for how young people are embedded in the gender norm change process are based on liberalised and racialised justifications, demonstrated by the 'youth as agents of change' model. Local ideas of youth agency to pursue gender equality norms, are contextually specific, and so could be classed heterogeneous across the global youth population. It is in this way that ideas of youth agency are in misalignment.

Youth agency is being imagined in similar constructs to womanhoods in historical development paradigms, as to justify normative, status-quo politics of the SDG era. They are racialised and spectacularised to justify a liberalised politics that overburdens structural change onto the individual. The dominant finding throughout this thesis is the justification that inequality can be solved in the individual domain. (It is so pervasive that it is a norm that is shared by the Bangladeshi youth participants, too.)

Girls are central in this rhetoric, demonstrating the merit of rooting 'youths as agents of change' in broader gender equality norms whereby these processes overlap. Young girls are often posed in development discourse to have the responsibility to bring themselves and their communities out of poverty and into male-dominated institutions and spaces (Dyer, 2015). The vision of 'GEWE' is set at an abstract high level but is burdened upon individuals who have little capacity or will to incite the kind of gender equality norms in this agenda. Young people are urged to pursue normative values toward sustainability and gender equality whilst navigating patriarchal and capitalist structures that actively inhibit such values. 'Youth as agents of change' over-burdens the imagined futures and social roles of youth whereby it, in particular, turns poor Black and Brown girls in the 'global south' into neoliberal subjects, as is found in UK Aid priorities.

Using the specific lens of youth agency in changing gender norms, this thesis offers up further evidence that exposes the disjuncture between international and local actors' norms when juxtaposed against one another. The kind of gender dissonance that is performed by the participants in this study is often ignored by the development sector (Loveday et al., 2021); thereby going beyond simplistic binaries between victimhood and resistance (ibid). Abebe (2019) argues that youth agency is a much-romanticised concept in universal, rights-based discourses, such as that of the SDG agenda, in which equating youth agency with free will and independence falls under a Western-centric, liberalist autonomy. It is this line of thinking in which the 'youth as agents of change' norm sets up a dichotomy between a young person that is a 'change agent' and a young person who is disempowered or not involved in social change. The findings of this study suggest the fallacy of this dichotomy.

Youth may resist, adapt, or adopt the subjectivity of being 'agents of change' in favour of their own visions of 'gender', 'feminism', and 'empowerment' to self-determine their personal politics. As found in this thesis, local youth agency can remain in line with the norms of the SDG era at the international level. Youth agency may be constructed in multiple, contesting ways within one group of youth: to

justify white, liberal feminisms; to resist predetermined gender equality norms; or something in between.

As indicated throughout this thesis, there is a falsehood to the international and local dichotomy that is often imagined by the researched youth and white, liberal feminisms in which ‘progressive values’ originate in the global domain. It is a dichotomy that upholds a preference for the international realm as superior - as indicated in modernity and class privilege of the participants and white, liberal feminist thinking in general – and devalues the class and worker struggles that are led by grassroots collectives (and represent the needs of those most ignored by the international domain).

By following this dichotomisation, this thesis has exposed that norms are in actuality constructed in multiple domains at once. Participants’ digital lives are perceived to exist on the global domain, when the materials they engage with are produced in their national context. Participants’ social media engagement, Bangladeshi national youth-oriented NGOs, and GAGE’s research politics are all examples that are constitutive of multiple domains. In exploring how ideas of gender equality norms and youth agency may align and misalign across the global and local, this thesis has unpacked the blurriness between these constructed domains.

These are domains that interact through norm travel, which gives ways to the alignments in ‘youth as agents of change’ in pursuit of gender equality norms. The disjuncture in norms between the ‘international’ and the ‘local’ is thereby due to the lack of interaction between spaces, with the views of the most marginalised being left out. It is in this way that the globally set agenda of the SDGs fails to fully represent even the worldview of the interviewed elite, urban Bangladeshi youth.

6.2 Putting the findings in dialogue with Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence

How do these findings sit in relation to GAGE’s research findings and methodologies? These are key considerations in light of this PhD’s partnership with the programme. Young people’s voice, agency, and community engagement are core tenets in GAGE’s conceptual framework. This thesis argues that young people’s agency can be operationalised, and co-opted, in multiple ways as a means to justify normative values around ‘GEWE’. Young people are simultaneously agentic beings themselves who may subvert these normative values around ‘GEWE’. In demonstrating young people’s position as possible dissident voices in the SDG era of white, liberal feminisms, this thesis has crafted a distinct space for itself within GAGE’s research agenda to understand the transitory period of youth lives.

What value does giving space to young peoples' agentic practices – around gender equality norms in the SDG era – bring to GAGE? This research brings a specific and nuanced perspective to the lives of urban Bangladeshi youth of a higher socio-economic context, with an in-depth picture of their capabilities around voice and agency, and their views on gender norms and how this may be shaped by community or parental norms. Given GAGE's large research focus on voice and agency, of value to GAGE is the knowledge that components of agency – be it aspirations, parental relationships, or other attributes outside of this study – may vary across young people depending on a variety of demographical characteristics, from wealth to digital access to knowledge about gender equality norms.

This thesis' dialogue with GAGE involved analysing GAGE itself to identify areas in which this thesis could critically reflect, and build upon, GAGE's research strategies and evidence. I recognise GAGE as both an international development actor that framed gender equality norms and youth attributes in its survey tool and as an evidence base on local gender equality norms and youth attributes. This thesis builds upon GAGE's large-scale quantitative surveying with follow-up qualitative methods to go in-depth into the lives of very few participants. In conjunction, I have thereby had the scope to conduct small-scale narrative analysis and NGO interviews, demonstrating the alternative ways that youth agency may be researched in the SDG era.

Given GAGE's place and purpose as the producer of nuanced and contextually located understandings of youth capabilities and the vulnerabilities they face, this thesis supports GAGE's evidence base that is critical of the homogenisation of youth in the SDG era. The research finds some young people have personal histories where in the past they had one opinion, which has now changed and that they are dynamic and continually changing human agents with life histories who react in different ways to new information; concepts that are largely missing in today's development discourse around youth.

By identifying themes of critical consciousness development, voice, aspirations, and parental relationships, this thesis has established a dynamic and informal method to investigate how young people may set out, and pursue, their own 'gender equality norms'. In the SDG era of white, liberal feminisms, there is Bangladeshi elite youth who replicate some of the politics of individualism but hold their own more inclusive views on gender equalities and are less formalised about how to enact change (i.e. social media engagement). This thesis has brought a novel aspect to the research and evaluation programme on the voice, agency, and engagement of adolescents around the world, by

interrogating not only gender norms but in exploring youths' ideas about who incites change and how this is achieved. The PhD offers complete and distinct ideas around how youth agency is constructed to pursue gender equality norms in the SDG era, whilst deeply interrelated with GAGE's line of inquiry and existing findings: gender norms and youth agency is dynamic and situationally specific.

This small-scale approach has allowed me to focus on and build upon GAGE's work in unanticipated ways. Where GAGE speaks to the transitory space between childhood to adulthood, this thesis zooms in further to situate this transitory space within the temporality of the SDG era. I have provided GAGE with further context to their research aim of 'How do they negotiate the gendered norms and expectations that shape their daily lives?' by contextualising this negotiation in a period that hypervisibilises youth responsibilities in development and disproportionately burdens them as potential challenges in the future. This thesis brings a voice that is explicitly critical of the discourses around the hypervisibilisation of girlhoods and liberal politics in gender and development policy and programming. Chapter Two's light touch review of literature on women's empowerment and foreign policy influences in Bangladesh contextualises GAGE's research in Bangladesh, to demonstrate the local negotiation of traditional gender norms.

GAGE is a key case study as it demonstrates that the disjuncture between international and local goes unchallenged because of its funding from UK Aid that stresses the instrumentalization of girlhood and cost efficiency. GAGE's critique of normative development practice and knowledge around youth is limited. It recognises how youth are overlooked but not how they may be affected by systemic aid withdrawal from one of the largest donors in the world.

This research's contributions to GAGE are as follows: 1) further evidence to present a nuanced representation of youth beyond development actor imagination, using a different study demographic (urban, affluent Bangladeshi youth); 2) evidence on what youth in said demographic envision as their ideal gender equality norms, given youth views of gender equality norms themselves are not included in GAGE's work; and 3) assessing GAGE's critiques of youth roles in change process as shaped by funding politics. Therefore, this thesis has contributed to GAGE by presenting evidence on how youth agentic action in pursuing gender equality norms is heterogeneous and contextually specific, ideas that are likely in contention with the neoliberal logic of 'youth as agents of change' and are unlikely unaccepted by funding bodies. And so, this thesis provides a richer evidence base for GAGE on the realities of some young people's lives in one of their programmatic countries.

6.3 Situating the findings in existing literature

The aim of this research was to explore why there is a chasm between the SDGs and serving the heterogeneous needs of the global population. The thesis affirms the findings of studies which locate the SDGs within the broader 'women's empowerment' agenda (Dhar, 2018; Esquivel, 2016; Koehler, 2016; Razavi, 2016), with a focus on the colonial and capitalist logic of the SDGs. This research interrogates the specific 'youth as agents of change' rhetoric – that has arisen in both SDG discourse and in broader development policy and practice – which has not been so widely investigated in research that bridges the SDGs and gender equality norms. By engaging with feminist theory, I was able to identify the discourses in the SDG textual framework that are imagining youth agency under racialised, liberal politics – akin to how the development industry imagines womanhood in the pursuit of 'GEWE'. It is in this way that the youth that are imagined in 'youth as agents of change' are coded as female, thereby supporting existing literature by Calkin (2015b) and Chant (2016a;2016b) on the burdening of girlhood as a justification for cost-efficient development programming.

Norm theory is a running thread throughout this work, brought in to demonstrate the nature of the SDGs as a set of imposed values that communicate governmentality. Using a situated approach to norm engagement, this thesis explores not only the SDG norms in the raw text of the '*70/1 Resolution...*', but in what ways they are taken up and actioned in development actor response to the SDGs and the extent of their manifestation in the lives of the participants. Norm theory has been valuable in exposing the imposed gender politics and assumptions of youth agency in the SDG era not as objective concepts but as values that comprise a rhetoric that requires contestation and interrogation. In doing so, this research presents a norms-based analysis that problematises the coloniality of the SDGs as a universalist agenda and considers the relevancy of the SDGs to youth realities.

This thesis has provided a multi-level and contrasting analysis of international and local ideas of youth agency, to expose their alignments and misalignments. It thereby contributes to development literature that recognises the disjuncture between the international and local domains, in which development architecture is underpinned by neoliberal politics and a racialised approach to who will *save the world*. It does so by exposing the falsehood of the constructed international domain to be relevant to the needs of all, another value in using norm theory. The exploration of GAGE's funding politics in relation to UK Aid is also pertinent to critical development theory. To research international development is to research not only the development industry but to acknowledge how the discursive

frameworks within development will structure and maintain unequal power embedded in relationships between the 'global north and south' (Kagal and Latchford, 2020). These discursive frameworks are central to the development project – to maintain neoliberal economic development as well as the politics of race in development (ibid) – and through the [indirect] silencing of these critiques by funding bodies.

Themes around chasms in international development were relevant in the light touch review of women's empowerment in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has historically been viewed as ripe for international influence in social and political changes regarding gender equality. In reality, the uptake of these norms has diverged at the local and national levels, particularly through worker struggles and academic critique of population control. To locate my analysis of youth agency in pursuit of gender norm change in Bangladesh was enriched by literature that points to its specific history in the gender and development industry and heterogeneity in gender equality norms. This thesis gives evidence of how Bangladeshi local gender equality norms are not solely influenced by internationally imposed norms but sprout locally too. My findings contribute to literature on the gender norms experienced by Bangladeshi youth and their ideas for gender norm change. It simultaneously provides evidence towards Faust and Nagar's (2008) research on English medium education as a tool for class privilege and Sa'ar's (2005) 'liberal bargain' on the human agent's internalisation of the liberal epistemology when benefitting from class privilege in the postcolonial context. In particular, this thesis has original contributions of evidence on how the demographic of urban, affluent Bangladeshi youth are situated within, and perpetuate, modernity, class privilege, and Western ethnocentrism in how they speak about what counts as social 'progress'.

This thesis speaks to the existing literature on youth agency – which typically looks into young people's agency to achieve everyday functionings (Revollo and Portela, 2019) – by specifically exploring young people's agentic actions towards their own visions of gender equality and how their values reflect that of normative gender equality ideals in the SDG era. Literature on women's agency in the context of 'GEWE' built a picture of what can constitute agentic actions to pursue specific goals, though much of this literature does not speak to the fact that agency is a concept that is shaped by temporality and the life course (Abebe, 2019). Literature on Structuration and contesting doxa were thereby also drawn to argue 'youth agency' as interdependent on their environments, and thereby dynamic.

And so, literature on agency, structuration, and norms have been bridged together, to establish a dynamic and informal method to investigate how young people may set out, and pursue, their own

‘gender equality norms’. The findings generate a composition of youth agency that is specific to young affluent Bangladeshis that are interested in social action and feminism: critical consciousness development; voice; aspirations; and navigating parental relationships. Such themes demonstrate how the participants adopt or resist these norms to better suit their needs and subvert the hypervisible and spectacularised role of the ‘youth activist’ with a seat at the table etc. The thesis supports Ortner’s (1995) notion of resistance as ‘the refusal of subjectification’, which implies an equal refusal to be considered as a subject that is imposed upon. Youth agentic action under imposed norms includes not only a rejection of the overall norm but are crossing the boundaries of gender norms to produce their own gender equality norms (ibid).

6.4 Limitations of the findings

The SDGs are a hugely complex 15-year agenda for the development industry and the world at large. Though there may be the intent to, for example, eliminate 'harmful' gender practices, the action prompted by the SDGs is ultimately the decision of signatory nations which cannot be predicted by critical analysis of the SDGs textual framework. As well, work to implement and monitor the SDGs is undertaken by a whole global system made up of governments, NGOs, civil society actors, the private sector, and intragovernmental organisations. And within these actors is a myriad of policy, programming, and advocacy to achieve and monitor the SDGs. Much of this thesis is comprised of narrative analyses of development actor constructions of the SDGs (and the SDG textual framework itself). This cannot give insight into programmatic outputs, national review processes, or civil society and private sector implementation plans. Yet, this thesis follows the line of enquiry that to identify what is held as validated or erased global norms is to interrogate how gender and youth are constructed in the SDG era. This is a key point to research since the universalism of the goals that run in standard development practice informs the disjuncture between international ideas of youth agency versus local ideas.

The claims of this research that international actors of the SDG era are motivated by liberalised and racialised ideologies can only be related to specific constructions of youth agency in the pursuit of gender equality. This is not to say that such ideologies do not also exist in, for example, environmental policy and action. It is looking at different sides of a narrowly defined phenomenon or norm, that of ‘youth as agents of changing gender norms’. The thesis tells a story that interrogates ‘youth as agents of change’ and how norms, structure, and agency interplay to construct young people’s agentic actions in pursuit of their own visions of gender equality. This is a topic that is worth interrogating but

can only be adequately answered by refining the interrogation of SDGs and development actor response around themes of 'gender norm change' and 'youth agency'.

This study cannot provide a solution to the inconsistencies between SDG-era constructions of youth agency in pursuit of gender equality norms and young peoples' agentic actions to pursue their own ideas of gender equality. It is possible to consider Bonsu's et al. (2020) argument for centring localisation strategies in SDG implementation, which involves engaging local and national governments to deliver SDG-related programming and monitoring in a citizen-centric approach. This would involve further norm translation to make the norms more relevant for the respective contexts. Yet, based on the findings of this thesis, a citizen-led approach could ultimately burden the (young) individual citizen and not negate the coloniality of the SDGs. This thesis does, however, bring to light not only how narratives of progressiveness are put on young people but also some young people's views on progressiveness and citizenship.

6.5 Future research and considerations

This thesis distinctly drew from feminist theory on white, liberal feminisms to identify the racialised, liberal politics of youth agency in the SDG textual framework. This critical lens can be applied in future work to conduct an in-depth analysis of programmatic response to the pursuit of 'GEWE' in the SDG era.

The original 'youth as agents of change' model demonstrates the entrenchment of development actors' operationalisation of 'youth as agents of change' logic in white, liberal feminisms: liberalised notions of empowerment and agency; posing gender norms as the locus of inequality; youth as altruistic and natural leaders; and a normative role for youth engagement with politics and rights. The model is a useful underpinning for any further research on a broader range of development actor policy and programming on the operationalization of youth agency toward gender equality norms. As well, future research can investigate the ways this model is justified across the development industry, e.g. to investigate white, liberal feminist epistemes in the youth-led climate movement.

This thesis found the misalignment of international ideas of youth agency with the local level is perpetuated by the inability of a programme like GAGE to speak to the ideological failings of the SDGs. There is a gap between what is required by neoliberal funding bodies like UK Aid and GAGE's own aims. The question of how funding may restrict the ideological critiques of normative development is

ripe for further investigation. How are the large-scale development actors investigated in this study also accountable to similar funding politics and thereby required to utilise particular framings of youth agency? As well, for a hugely funded programme like GAGE to be so shaped in this way, how do smaller, localised organisations experience constraints by funding bodies in how they share ideological and political critiques of development practice and thinking?

This thesis bridges theory on agency, structuration, and norms to provide consideration for youth agentic actions towards their own ideas of gender equality, under prevailing gender equality norms. The findings defied the spectacularising of youth agency that is assumed in the 'youth as agents of change' model. Such insights are apt for future development agenda-setting, which should recognise the multiplicity of youth agency to pursue gender equality and the relevance of gender equality norms to young peoples' realities and aspirations. Further research can serve to unveil possible further norm inconsistencies between the politics of SDGs / policy of normative gender equality goals and youth agency.

As noted in the 'Limitations of the Research Process', the elite capture in the recruitment process led to findings that are relevant only to wealthy, urban young people in Bangladesh. Future research to expand this thesis would include the original research aims of the PhD research: an exploration of the similarities and differences of young people's agentic actions and visions of 'GEWE' across the 'global north' and 'global south'; capturing differences in agency across the youth life stage (i.e. older youth vs younger youth); and comparing young people who act as advocates for NGOs against young people with no interest in gender equality norms or social action.

For GAGE, this thesis presents the value in original, independent analyses of their quantitative datasets and questionnaires. Doing so has presented new insights into their research community and given light to the connections between personal values around gender equality and community norms; a phenomenon that deserves further research. This partnership has provided methodological critiques around GAGE's quantitative approaches, given how mass surveying fails to capture the thematic connections that often give light to more robustly nuanced evidence. This thesis has established a dynamic, informal, and digitised research strategy to investigate how young people may set out, and pursue, their own 'gender equality norms'; ideas that can prove useful as GAGE continues its research on youth voice and agency.

6.6 Reflections on the thesis

As noted in the Introduction chapter of this thesis, reflexivity has been embedded in the process of research, analysis, and writing that comprise this work. In this section, I put forward final reflections conducted through the lens of my multiple positionalities. So as to overcome the paralysis of introspection, I have been continually asking myself questions. When has it felt too close to home? When have I felt uncomfortable? Has it been to my advantage in collecting and interpreting the data? How have I learnt and unlearnt? What follows is a selection of some of my responses.

This thesis is an account of valid, rigorous research that was conducted in an entirely desk-based manner. Without the need to cater to the traditionalist fallacy of 'valid fieldwork' that would involve a long period in Bangladesh, this thesis has been able to strongly evidence youth agency towards gender equality norms in the local domain. These findings have been put in dialogue with a wide-ranging analysis of youth agency at the international level from different kinds of development actors, to demonstrate the disjuncture between these ideas of youth agency. It is an aspect of research that I have been able to allocate due energy to because I did not need to dedicate so much time to coordinating and conducting in-person research in Bangladesh. This is the value of reflexive practice: by recognising the traditionalist fallacy of 'valid fieldwork', I could confidently pursue the remainder of the research through online means.

I also had reflections about how my views about key topics of the thesis changed over the course of the PhD. Both 'gender equality' and 'youth agency' are concepts that should be interrogated and not be used objectively or at face value. They have been equipped by the SDG agenda to push a certain viewpoint for what is 'leaving no girl behind'. Truthfully, I have previously used 'gender norm change' and 'gender equality' interchangeably. This was without regard that 'gender equality' is a process of gender norms changing that is ultimately framed/shaped by political viewpoints, such as global knowledge on what is proposed as 'progressive' or 'equality' or 'women's empowerment' (in the case of the SDGs). This also works for what is 'youth agency'. It is not an objective concept of 'you have it or you don't' but rather a way we can see how this has been equipped. There is youth agency to pursue the SDGs as normative 'agents of change', there is youth agency through navigating parental relationships, or there is youth agency through aspiring for a different future. In this way, I have had to unlearn that seemingly objective concepts are framed by various discursive frameworks, including those that I was trying to interrogate, i.e. white, liberal feminisms.

During this PhD journey, I personally developed a critical consciousness of the white, liberal feminist view that parental expectations are only resonant for youth when they still apply in adulthood. From the white, liberal feminist standpoint I am (and so many other Brown women) an oxymoron: I am 'empowered' (in that I am highly educated and hold some social capital) but also still hold customary obligations based on parental expectations. This insight demonstrates the fallacy of the emphasis on youth in global gender equality norms. The participants' entrenchment in modernity and superiority over traditionalism is relevant here. Despite their beliefs, they too are still held in restrictive norms despite their supposed global viewpoints and use of the internet. These reflections on the thesis findings show such ideologies cannot be considered as 'superior' or 'more progressive' than the other.

I saw a lot of myself in the duality of the participants' life: navigation of their parental relationships in which they keep their gender equality norms to themselves, and an online life with peers in which they are bolder in sharing their gender equality norms. With this personal experience, I have been able to analyse the level of tenacity these youth agents hold in how they make active and strategic choices and compromises in how they present themselves to their parents (and the wider community of elders) or make decisions within the confines of parental expectations. Further, I anticipated the gendered way that girls' careers are more strongly shaped by parents than boys. For this cohort of participants, youths' capacity to imagine futures – as an agentic action – is gendered owing to their environment, a finding that was particular to my personal analysis.

The participants' embeddedness in liberalist, modernist politics around change is like my reflections on youth advocacy in the Introduction chapter. The participants *sincerely* believed – without any malice – that their progressive views were superior to the traditionalist mindset of many Bangladeshis owing to their educatedness and *youth*. It is here that I bring up the introspective question that I think of when I reflect on my time as a youth advocate: What specialism was I giving besides being a young person that was regurgitating (but very much believing in) what I was taught as a youth advocate? There are no answers here, but to say that the influence of 'youth as agents of change' is a narrative that is highly palpable and persuasive to young people themselves. What implications does the enthusiastic uptake of norms at the local level mean when these norms are highly irrelevant to more marginalised youth? Perhaps, that it will be difficult to erase the over-burdening and racialised nature of these youth agency norms for a larger group of youth.

7 Bibliography

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8 Annex 1

The table of documents that were analysed for the narrative analysis of ‘youth as agents of change’ rhetoric across development actors in the SDG era.

Organisation/s Name	Year of Publication	Title of Text	Resource Type	Geography
ActionAid	2019	Shifting Power to Young People: How young people can lead and drive solutions in humanitarian action	Research and Recommendations	54 countries
Advocates for Change	2015	Creating Safe Space for GLBTQ Youth: A Toolkit	Toolkit	USA
ATHENA International	2018	What Women Want: A toolkit for putting accountability into action	Toolkit	Global
BRAC	2019	Role of youth organisations in development of Bangladesh	Research and Recommendations	Bangladesh
Development Alternative	2019	Towards a Thriving and Sustainable Youth Civil Society	Toolkit	Theoretical
DFID	2015	Putting young people at the heart of development: The Department for International Development’s Youth Agenda	Policy Strategy	UK to Global
ECPAT	2012	Youth Power- A Manual on Youth-led Advocacy	Toolkit	Global
Friendship Ambassadors Foundation	2019	25th Session of the Youth Assembly Concept Note.	Concept Note	Global
GAGE	2019	The invisibility of adolescents within the SDGs: Assessing gaps in gender and age disaggregation to leave no adolescent behind	Research and Recommendations	Global
Girl Up, Rise Up	2019	Girls' Voices Curriculum	Toolkit	Global
Girls Not Brides	2018	Stand up, speak out!	Toolkit	Global
Girls' Advocacy Alliance	2019	Annual Report 2019	Report	Global

Hacey	2019	Girl Empowerment	Concept Note	Nigeria, Global
International HIV/AIDS Alliance	2016	Bangladesh: Transforming young peoples' lives	Research and Recommendations	Bangladesh
International Planned Parenthood Foundation	2016	Young people as advocates: Your action for change toolkit	Toolkit	Across IPPF's 6 regions
OECD and ActionAid	2015	Beyond Smiling Faces: How engaging with youth helps transform societies and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals	Policy Strategy	Global
Oxfam	2016	YOUTH AND INEQUALITY: Time to support youth as agents of their own future	Research and Recommendations	"Across low, middle-income and high-income countries"
Plan International	2017	Girls Champions of Change: Curriculum for Gender Equality and Girls' Rights	Toolkit	Active in 41 countries
Plan International and Asian Development Bank	2019	What's the evidence? Youth Engagement and the Sustainable Development Goals.	Research and Recommendations	Global
Plan International UK	2019	Adolescent girls' potential to disrupt the gender socialization process: Evidence from Plan International UK	Research and Recommendations	Global
Population Council	2016	BUILDING GIRLS' PROTECTIVE ASSETS: A Collection of Tools for Program Design	Toolkit	35 Girls' Roster countries
Restless Development	2015	Accountability in Action: A practical guide for young people tracking the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	Toolkit	UK, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Ghana, and Uganda
Restless Development, UNFPA	n.d.	YOUTH LEADERSHIP PARTICIPATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY 2.0.	Toolkit	Global

Rutgers International	2016	UNITE FOR BODY RIGHTS –SRHR ALLIANCE END-OF-PROGRAMME EVALUATION, SYNTHESIS REPORT	Evaluation Report	9 countries in Africa and Asia
Save the Children	2017	YOUTH IN ACTION: Training Module on Gender Mainstreaming in Youth Livelihoods Programs	Toolkit	Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda
Sexual Violence Research Initiative	2018	BEING HEARD: ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE – SVRI FORUM TOOLKIT	Toolkit	Global
The Chicago Council on Global Affairs	2020	Women and Girls as Change Agents: The Global Mandate for Girls' Education	Research and Recommendations	Global
The Coalition for Adolescent Girls	2015	Partners and Allies: Toolkit for meaningful adolescent girl engagement	Toolkit	Global
The Girls' Network	n.d.	Stories from The Girls Network	Research and Recommendations	UK
Together for Girls	n.d.	Together for girls strategy	Policy Strategy	Global
UN Inter Agency Network on Youth Development / UNDP	2017	GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE AS AGENTS OF CHANGE IN THE 2030 AGENDA	Policy Strategy	Global
UN Women	2014	The Change-Makers: A young activist's toolkit for Ending Violence against Women and Girls	Toolkit	Global
UNFPA	2019	My body, my life, my world: a global strategy for adolescents and youth	Policy Strategy	Global
UNICEF	2019	Transformative Change for Children and Youth in the Context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	Research, Conceptual Framework	Theoretical
Woman Deliver	2016	A DISCUSSION PAPER ON MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT	Research and Recommendations	Global
Women Deliver	2018	Advocating for Change for Adolescents! A Practical Toolkit for Young People Advocating for	Toolkit	Theoretical

		Improved Adolescent Health and Well-being		
Womankind International	2017	Standing with the changemakers: lessons from supporting women's movements	Research and Recommendations	Global
Working Group on Youth-Inclusive Governance Indicators (Restless Development, UNDP, Plan International, the Children's Environments Research Group, the Centre for Children's Rights (Queen's University Belfast))	2016	'Critical agents of change' in the 2030 Agenda: Youth-inclusive governance indicators for national-level monitoring	Policy Strategy	Global
World Association of Girls Guides and Girl Scouts	2019	Speak out for her world	Toolkit	Global
World Association of Girls Guides and Girl Scouts	2018	Be the change 2030	Toolkit	Global
World Vision International	2016	Unpacking Gender Equality Approach to Children and Young People's Participation	Research and Recommendations	Global

9 Annex 2

Research with youth-centric NGOs – Interview guide

Introductions

1. About my project
2. Are you okay with recording for the purpose of data analysis?
 - a. I will name neither yourself or your organisation. You are able to pull out or skip questions if you want.
3. Describe your role [*your organisation*]
4. What does [*your organisation*] do?

About [*your organisation*]

5. Could you explain some of the programming which involves your Gender Equality? Mission statement.
6. Could you describe the vision or theory of change? What inputs to create what outputs?
7. Tell me about the collaboration/partnerships as part of [*your organisation*]'s pursuit of Gender Equality?
8. Do the SDGs inform your work?
9. How does your organisation use 'youth as agents of change' or youth as 'changemakers' in the vision of change?
10. What does youth-led or leadership mean in the pursuit of 'Gender Equality' and 'Women's Empowerment'?
11. Do you aim to 'empower' the youth you work with? Why and how? Or the beneficiaries
12. How may youth benefit from being a part of it?
13. How are young people engaged in the formation of your programming and policy?

About the youth

14. What demographics does your organisation partner with? Age range?
15. What gender inequality do the youth you work with experience?
16. Do you consider the agency of the young people you work with? Why and how? How does this differ across the life stage and across genders?
17. What gender, social or cultural norms do the youth you work with face and why? What do you think can combat this? Do kinship roles or stereotyping relate?

18. What harmful norms do the youth you work with face and why? What do you think can combat this? Do kinship roles or stereotyping relate? How do young people bring in these experiences in their advocacy?
19. What do you ask of service delivery to engage with youth or be more inclusive or sensitive of youth needs?

Youth roles

20. What 'advocacy' do young people engage in?
21. Do young people have a role as data collectors or researchers?
22. How do you think of youth engaging with their peers in the pursuit of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment?
23. How do you think of youth engaging with their parents and adult authority figures in the pursuit of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment?
24. How do you think of youth engaging with their community?
25. With the young people you work with, do you provide education or training around advocacy or gender 'equality' or 'justice'? What does this involve?
26. What role do men and boys have in the programme?

My research

27. In this research, I'm looking to see how young people pursue their own ideas of gender, Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment – outside the boundaries of the SDGs – and what ideas we can draw about youth agency. What kind of data do you think I would get out of the young people you work with?
28. How can I negotiate getting the consent of young people's parents?
29. Can I recruit your young people in my data collection?

10 Annex 3

Research with young people – Research activity 1: Individual interview guide round 1

Introductions

1. What the research is about and introduce yourself
2. Ability to withdraw at any point
3. Happy to audio record

About you and your social networks

4. How old are you?
5. Tell me about yourself
6. What are you studying at school / college?
7. What are your hobbies?
8. Girls: A girl's club? // Boys: A boys' club?
9. A co-ed youth club (excluding sports and religious groups)?
10. Do your parents or other adults in your life have an interest in community, local, or national politics or activism?
11. Have your social networks changed in light of the closure of schools and public spaces due to the Covid-19 Pandemic?
12. Describe the kind of content you usually see online – do you engage with any 'activism' or social issues?
 - a. Has your engagement with online spaces changed since the Covid-19 Pandemic?

Perceived agency and decision-making ability to challenge gender norms

Verbally respond (Strongly agree, mildly agree, neither agree nor disagree, mildly disagree, strongly disagree) to the following statements

13. I am able to choose my path in life
14. I am directing my interests in my life
15. I feel I can change local people's attitudes and behaviours
16. I feel able to engage with current affairs and the world around me

17. I feel taken seriously by adults
18. I am able to show my feelings without fear of being teased
19. I have able to be a leader or force for change in my community
20. I am able to speak my mind in my family home
21. I am able to speak my mind with my peers – both in person and online
22. I am able to tell my peers to change their minds regarding learning about science, technology, and math as much as boy
23. I am able to tell my peers to change their minds regarding: shared household tasks between boys and girls
24. I am able to tell my peers to change their minds regarding: women and girls having their own savings
25. I am able to tell my peers to change their minds regarding: equal opportunities for work
26. I am able to tell my peers to change their minds regarding: saying DV is wrong (age dependent)
27. I am able to tell my peers to change their minds regarding: women can participate in political or leadership positions
28. I am able to tell my peers to change their minds regarding: men can take on care work while women take on formal work
29. If you were a different gender, you would be treated the same as you are now at school or in public spaces
30. If you were a different gender, you would be treated the same as you are now in your home and family life

Visions for society

31. Is there a person that you respect, follow, look up to, or want to be like? (can be either famous or non-famous)
32. What are the two main characteristics of this person that you admire most?
33. What is something that happened in the news etc. that you feel passionate about?
34. Do you feel able to achieve your goals, right now? Or does something need to change? E.g. at school.
35. Name 3 things you want to change about society.
36. Name 3 things you want to keep in society.

37. In light of the Pandemic, do you feel we are more interconnected as a global community?
(pick up on any rhetoric of global community and UN type discourse in light of the pandemic)

Visions for your future

38. Where do you see yourself at the age of 30? In the future
39. Do you see yourself getting married? At what age? Do you want children?
40. If you did not want to get married or have children, do you think you would be supported?
41. What career path are you interested in? Why?
42. Do you think you could have taken this career path 20 years ago? What has changed?
43. Where did you get your aspirations about the future from?
44. Have your visions for the future changed in light of the Covid-19 Pandemic?
45. Optional: Do you see yourself continuing with your youth activism work?

Next interview + goodbye

46. Schedule next interviews...
47. Go over shared expectations and topics to speak about for the second interview – more interactive. Your ideas around gender, equality, social change, and your role as a citizen.
48. Image activity and diary activity details

11 Annex 4

Research with young people – Research activity 2: Individual interview guide round 2

Introductions

1. What we'll be going over in the interview
2. Ability to withdraw at any point
3. Happy to audio record

Gender and social mapping exercise: Experience of hearing about 'Gender Equality' norms in their lives. Gender rules, attitudes, and expectations in kinship roles and in the community. Structural, institutional, and social barriers they may face.

- Screenshare tree diagram with three parts: the leaves, the trunk, the roots. The roots stand for ideology and gender values (simplified as roles, expectations, or stereotypes). The trunk stands for institutions which influence those values such as family, education and religion. The leaves stand for the activities that are undertaken by women.
- Ask each participant to reflect on the tree diagram, e.g. Who they feel are the gatekeepers and decision-makers in their communities? What of the influence of their parents?
- During the reflections, I will ask:
 - What kind of conversations do you hear about "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment' on the news or in your school/college?
 - Do you think this is relevant to your life?
 - What do you think about these conversations? Is something missing? Or should this not be a concern?

Mind-mapping exercise: How they define/recognise gender inequality? Who has responsibility to incite change? And in what areas?

What is 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment' to them? Where have they heard this from?

- Using outlines of a single human body / multiple bodies for each keyword, I ask participants to write similar words or phrases they associate with the keyword/phrase.
- Screenshare and show them this outline and input it with the words they tell me.

- Gender
 - Change in a person
 - Change between people
 - Equality
 - An empowered person
 - A citizen
 - Agent of change / changemaker
- I will then ask the following question:
 - Do you challenge gender rules, why/why not?

Vignettes: Where/whether they identify spaces or opportunities for fictional young people to negotiate gender norms, if not, why?

I will facilitate conversations using vignettes and open questions concerning ideas and debates on perceptions and opportunities for inciting 'gender norm change' in their lives, communities, and in public service delivery.

1. Vignette 1

Person A and Person B are both girls. They are hearing about a programme in their school which supports all genders interested in pursuing science. Person A expresses an interest to participate. Person B opposes this. Person B says that Person A has never shown an interest in this before, and it is not appropriate for girls to participate, given boys will be present also. Meanwhile, Person B is participating in a girls-led peer-to-peer campaign about girls' empowerment. What would you do if you were Person A? What do you think about Person B?

2. Vignette 2

A local organisation is asking for young people to advocate for Gender Equality and to come up with their own campaigns. Person A wants to participate in a campaign with their schoolmates for girls in the local school to be mentored by female business leaders. Person A's parents feel that this is a distraction from their schoolwork. Person A is a very hard worker at school and this is not a problem. Person A thinks that the parents are using this as an excuse to not be involved in the campaign. What would you do if you were Person A?

3. Vignette 3

Person A is a boy who does not have much interest in the things that most boys are interested in. He is often teased for not being like the other boys. Person B is a boy who does not tease Person A but is friends with boys who do tease him. Person B feels sorry for what Person A is going through but is scared that he will be teased too. What would you do if you were Person B?

4. Vignette 4

An international charity has partnered with the school that Person A (a girl) attends. This charity wants to support girls in school – including to stop bullying, help girls' attendance, prevent child marriage, help with sanitary facilities for girls. They are setting up a youth group of the pupils to consult with the charity. Person A is not much interested in these issues and is happy with her life at school, her lessons, and her friends. Person A's parents think that the youth group will help Person A's employability profile and be beneficial in applying for universities in the future. Person A does not think she is suited for this role and knows many other people in her school who could be more appropriate. What would you do if you were Person A?

I will then ask: Can you tell me about a time when you think you did something that was unusual for a girl/boy?

Yes/No/Unsure statements: What extent young people believe that change is possible, and in what areas of life they feel they face inequalities? What is young people's understanding of the SDG agenda, reflections on selected targets relating to gender, and suggestions for thematic gaps?

Ask participants to vote 'agree' 'disagree' 'unsure' in response to statements and then justify. I will show them an example of an SDG target (or excluded issue) or related discourse through a more comprehensible statement.

1. 'if I thought my school is treating me unfairly because of my gender, it is my responsibility to demand for change'
2. 'we need sexual and reproductive health education in schools when we talk about sexual and reproductive health rights'
3. 'The global pandemic shows we have a global responsibility to act'
4. I believe I am an 'agent of change'

5. 'When I grow up, it doesn't matter if it is uncommon to see an equal share of household tasks'
6. 'women need to work harder to get men to take them seriously as leaders'
7. 'a global agenda to 'Gender Equality' is helpful in achieving it in my community'
8. 'it is cause for concern that girls' education is not being taken seriously'
9. 'What I hear about Gender Equality doesn't concern me'
10. 'We all have a role to achieve Gender Equality'
11. 'I have seen how expectations and roles change between the older generation to the younger generation'
12. What the community thinks of me and my family impacts on how outspoken I am
13. 'Young people should have a say in what 'Gender Equality' looks like (in govt policy)'
14. 'I feel like there is too much pressure on me to think about my future and how I can create change'
15. 'there is too much emphasis on women's roles when we talk about Gender Equality'
16. 'I would like to be taken more seriously by adults when I speak my opinions'

Unpacking 'youth as agents of change' and their reflections

1. Do you want to bring a 'change' to your community? Area? Country?
2. Bangladesh: Does the government have a role in this? Or foreign governments?
3. UK: What do you know about UK foreign aid? Does this have a role in inciting gender norm change in other countries and how?
4. What does 'changing the world' mean to you?
5. Name 3 things you hope the next generation to do differently, please refer to gender if you can.
6. Name 3 things you want adults to do differently, please refer to gender if you can.

Next research phase and goodbye

1. Is there anything you would like to tell me about on the record or off the record?
2. What we'll be going over in following research phase – what email for diaries

12 Annex 5

Example of a participant's contribution to the image activity

2. An aspiration



Greta Thunberg

[Greta Thunberg's Speech to World Leaders](#)

The passion and emotion that Greta Thunberg showed in her speech to the World Leaders about climate change is something I really look up to. Not only did she show that young people could make an impact, she stated how important it was for our generation to take point on the issues in the world.

13 Annex 6

Example of a participant's contribution to the diary activity

Day 9/14

Moment 1:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CNaEwAKjJXR/?igshid=1kq7xdoxf4760>

This post actually shook me to bits. I always thought Imran Khan, the PM of Pakistan was a bit different, broad minded and open than the others. I couldn't believe him saying these.

Moment 2:

I had a group assignment with my classmates today. It was awkward because most of us haven't meet each other in more than a year because of the lockdown. Nonetheless, it felt truly phenomenal to reconnect with friends and create new ones.

Moment 3:

I had a mini breakdown today. Coronavirus is increasing very rapidly in Bangladesh. Today 2 of my close relatives were admitted to the hospitals. I felt broken and very angry at coronavirus. But eventually, someday, things have to get better.

Any social media page(s) of interest:

@shethepeopletv. Super inspiring platform for girls to believe in their dreams and fight against sexism.