



**New Forms of Adolescent Voice and
Agency Through ICT and Mobile
Phone Use**

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1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digitization that has taken over the world has also reached Bangladesh. This is evidenced by the increasing number of internet users from 31.1 million in February 2012 (BTRC, 2012) to 110.8 million in October 2020 (BTRC, 2020). However, access to information and communications technology (ICT) remains unequal, with a 38% urban-rural gap and a 62% gender gap in internet use (GSMA Intelligence, 2019). Research conducted by Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) shows disparities in affordability, digital skills, and online risks among users from different socio-economic groups. These play an essential role in perpetuating inequalities in the provision of internet access and the availability of services and devices (Livingstone et al., 2017). Technology is uniquely shaping the life experiences and opinions of the adolescents growing up in this rapidly digitizing world. In Bangladesh, this unprecedented increase in connectivity with the outside world is changing the lived realities of the adolescents by challenging the boundaries of gender and social norms. It is important to understand in what ways digitization as well as digital inequalities are affecting the lives of the adolescents.

This policy brief is based on the findings from a study conducted by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University under the GAGE program. The study explores, “What are the implications, both positive and negative, of mobile phone and internet use for adolescent voice and agency?” We explored the difference in these implications between adolescent boys and girls, between adolescents of well-off and poorer families, and between adolescents living in Dhaka city and those in Cumilla, a more rural district. We addressed voice and agency through indicators relevant for Bangladeshi adolescents such as developing relationships; accessing information that contributes to raising their voice and increasing decision-making capacity; learning new skills; developing online risk recognition and mitigation skills; and creating a sense of belonging to a larger virtual community. We also explored whether and how voice and agency are used to express opinions, organize, and build youth leadership. Finally, the study sought to identify and understand the concerns of parents and teachers regarding risks such as cyberbullying, harassment, and the perceived social and moral degradation of the youth through the use and exposure to online content.

2. Data and Methodology

Our sample consisted of 64 male and female school-going adolescents attending class VIII, who were mostly 14 years old. We conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with adolescents from four types of schools: a mainstream English medium school in Dhaka, generally attended by children of higher socioeconomic status; a mainstream Bengali medium school in Dhaka, generally attended by children from middle-class families; a slum-based secondary school in Dhaka, attended by children of lower-income families, and a government secondary school in a rural area in Cumilla. In-depth interviews (IDIs) were also conducted with three adolescent boys and three adolescent girls in each school, selected from each FGD. We also conducted separate FGDs with five parents with children and four teachers teaching in class VIII in each school. FGDs with parents of boys and girls were held separately in some cases and jointly in others, depending on their availability. Moreover, we observed a cybercafé and a mobile data shop in the slum location.

3. Key Findings

First we looked at the ownership of and access to different types of devices and different forms of internet among the adolescents in our sample. Then we explored whether access to information (voice) and skills (agency) vary by gender, class, and location. Subsequently, we analyzed how and to what extent the voice and agency enhance the opportunities and abilities of the adolescents to build relationships, participate in decision making, recognize risks and mitigate them, and enhance their belongingness to a wider group. Finally, we concluded with recommendations about the role that gatekeepers (specifically parents, teachers, and the government) can play in ensuring a safe environment for the adolescents' internet and mobile use.

Divides in the ownership of digital devices and in internet access exist across class, location, and gender among adolescents.

"When our country will be fully digitized, instead of carrying books, we would be just carrying a tab [let] with all the study materials. I would learn graphic design using online sources and earn money from home. I am already doing many things using the internet which is helpful."

—Boy, class VIII, slum school

Our study found that children from higher socio-economic classes are more likely to own personal mobile phones, computers, and other digital devices, with no apparent gender difference. Children from middle-class and poorer families and from rural areas rarely owned personal mobile phones, relying mostly on shared ones. They also rarely owned or had limited access to computers, since the schools they attended did not have sufficient resources.

In terms of access the internet, we saw that adolescents belonging to the higher socio-economic groups have unlimited access to the internet because they have Wi-Fi at home and in most places they visit. Hardly any of the other adolescents had Wi-Fi at home and they

all used mobile data, either paid for by their parents/siblings or bought by themselves with savings from their lunch money. There are gender differences, primarily among middle and poorer classes, in access to the internet as well. For instance, some boys use their friends' mobile or can access public Wi-Fi as they have greater mobility. Girls have limited physical mobility and, thus, cannot access public Wi-Fi. None of the girls mentioned buying their own mobile data either, which the boys regularly do to use the internet, even when they use their friends' mobiles.

This inequality in access to digital devices and the internet across socio-economic classes, locations, and genders is widening the gender and class differences in digital skills among adolescents in Bangladesh. A strong correlation between digital access and digital skills was found in the "Digital Literacy and Access to Public Services" study conducted in 2019 by BIGD across 6,500 households in Bangladesh (Shadat et al., 2020). Consequently, there is a possibility of not only creating new forms of marginalization, but also increasing existing inequalities among adolescents due to the persistent digital divide.

All adolescents have some access to mobile phones, but the quality of access varies.

Although everyone has access to a mobile phone, irrespective of class, location, and gender, the quality of access varies depending on whether the devices are personally owned by the adolescent or shared with family members. One implication of this is the time adolescents spend on the devices. Adolescents who own devices can spend more unsupervised time on them, except when they are at school. Nonetheless, some parents have rules that restrict the time they spend on gaming or social media.

In addition to owning their devices, adolescents belonging to the higher socio-economic groups can use computers in school, and much of their curriculum is taught using ICT. Unlimited access to the internet also allows them to spend more time on the internet for different purposes, such as research, education, and skill building—an opportunity that other adolescents do not have.

Most adolescents belonging to other socio-economic groups have to share the devices of their parents or siblings. This means that the

time they spend on the devices is limited as they “snatch” bits of time in between uses by the person owning them. The cost of mobile data also limits internet use. That is why these adolescents use it mostly for activities they find most entertaining, for example, browsing social media, downloading songs and movies, or for gaming; they use the internet for educational purposes only when necessary. Therefore, although these adolescents know about the various ways the internet may be used for educational purposes, their actual use may be limited to entertainment purposes because of the short time they get to use the device. In Bengali medium, rural and slum schools, although ICT education is compulsory from class VI onwards, adolescents do not always have access to computers or have to share them. This reduces their opportunity to use them for educational purposes and develop their skills.

A second implication is that adolescents who own devices have the freedom to visit any site they wish, unless parents monitor their search history. On the other hand, adolescents who share devices use their time to play games or visit specific sites that they need or want. These adolescents are also more likely to visit the type of websites that the owners of the devices visit or watch shows that the owners watch, since these pop up as recommended sites and shows for the owners. The adolescents also tend to refrain from visiting websites or shows that the owners would not approve of if they found out. It is also important to note that adolescents who share devices may not have their own Facebook or other accounts, instead, they use their parents’ accounts. In this way, parents can closely monitor the online activities of their children. So access also shapes the use of mobile phones.

There are gender differences in the use of the mobile phone even when both girls and boys have access. Girls from middle-class and poorer socio-economic groups and particularly girls from the rural area are heavily restricted by parents in their use of phones. As one girl from the rural school mentioned, her mother kept the phone locked away, as she believed that girls become “spoiled” by using mobile phones.

Therefore, although the number of mobile connections in Bangladesh is equivalent to 99% of the total population and the internet penetration rate is 41% as on Jan 2020 (Kemp, 2020), these numbers may not provide a complete picture of the digital access, especially for adolescents. We should consider the differences of owned versus shared devices while planning interventions.

Gatekeepers' negative assumptions might widen the digital divide and restrict voice and agency among female adolescents.

"Before giving your daughter a mobile phone, you should consider that your daughter might come to know someone on Facebook and start talking to him. You see, she might fall for someone, and he may become attracted to her. This is the reason you should not give mobile phones to your daughters."

—Mother of adolescent boy, rural school

Biases and negative assumptions regarding digital devices and connectivity among gatekeepers, both at home and in school, play a pivotal role in shaping the quality of access and determining how adolescents use digital technology. Most parents have a negative view of adolescents using a mobile phone and internet. The preoccupation of parents around possible romantic relationships their children may get involved in clouds their view. Parents across all socio-economic groups invariably monitor their daughters' use of mobile phones and internet more closely. Compared to their sons, they are more restrictive of the time their daughters spend on it and more sceptical of their use of it. In general, parents are less willing to believe that adolescents would use the internet for educational purposes. They are also worried that the amount of time that the adolescents spend on their devices might be harmful for them.

Similar biases are seen among school teachers as well. Rural school teachers believe that boys are more interested in, and better at, using computers. Consequently, they are given more opportunity to work directly on the computers. This was challenged by the girls in the presentation of our findings at a workshop at the rural school. Girls said that they are also interested in using computers, but they are not given the chance because of the biases of the teachers.

Adolescent girls, who are already disadvantaged in terms of digital access compared to the boys, are therefore facing additional challenges because of the negative biases of both parents and teachers. According to the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA)'s Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019 (GSMA Intelligence, 2019), 58% of adult

women in Bangladesh own mobile phones, but only 13% use the internet. The comparative figures for men are 86% and 30%, respectively. And because digital access is so strongly correlated with digital skills (Shadat et al., 2020), this is likely to increase the digital divide experienced by adolescent girls, and possibly present an obstacle to the development of their full potential.

Access to the internet contributes to adolescent voice and agency through building confidence.

Access to mobile phones and the internet has a strong impact on adolescents' voice and agency. Our study shows that male and female adolescents have gained voice that they did not have before through mobile and internet use. Armed with information and greater exposure to various ways of being and doing, they form and express their own opinions. They feel encouraged and confident to showcase their skills and discover hidden talents that they themselves were unaware of. Finally, they are able to hone interpersonal skills, and contribute to decision-making on certain matters at the household level. These processes lead to incremental increases in self-confidence of the adolescents, which has a positive impact on adolescent voice and agency.

From our research, we found that adolescents are developing a multitude of skills using mobile phones and the internet. Boys and girls from different socio-economic backgrounds and different locations seem to be picking up similar skills, like cooking and do-it-yourself handicraft skills, even if they are using different apps to get there. These skills, to some extent, seem to be challenging traditional gender roles—girls learning dancing and singing and even uploading their own performances online challenges the norm that disapproves of girls singing and dancing in public. A girl from the Bengali medium school spoke of her love of uploading her own TikTok videos. Boys learning cooking and eliciting appreciation from their families challenges the notion of masculinity that characterizes cooking as a feminine skill. Adolescents also use the internet to hone skills and interests they already have. Thus, some of the girls talked about learning more about photography and some boys talked about improving their football skills.

An important finding is that what the adolescents are watching, what is catching their attention or pricking their curiosity, and the apps they

are using are, to some extent, related with the physical and normative contexts they are in and the kind of support they get from their schools. Thus, we find that students of the slum school use a smaller range of apps than students of English medium schools and are less likely to use the internet for educational purposes. They are also more likely to watch Islamic videos, which their parents/older siblings watch.

A recent study has shown that coaching classes in English and Mathematics had a strong effect on the empowerment of adolescents (Amin and Mesunas, 2020) through building self-confidence. Findings from our research show that adolescents use a number of apps to improve their grasp over subjects they find difficult, particularly English, Mathematics, and Science. There may be variation in the actual apps that adolescents studying different curriculum use, but they all report that using the apps have benefited their performance. The lack of access to this facility has also been lamented by a few, like this girl from the slum-based school:

“One can find information about what chemical to mix with some other chemical to create a certain type of reaction. There are many examples of these reactions on the internet. There are even video clips of lectures by teachers on these topics...Yes, it feels bad that I can’t see any of that...I occasionally feel like it would have been better if I had access to the internet.”

Another positive aspect of internet access is adolescents’ increased participation in some forms of household decision-making, such as the purchase of various household goods, clothes, and gadgets. This applied across all socio-economic backgrounds. Respondents also reported to help their family decide on places to visit for trips and vacations through searching the internet. Adolescents said they helped their parents to access new information as well as learn skills. For instance, a female student from the Bengali medium school helped her mother access information regarding her medication. In many cases, adolescents reported using the internet to take their own decisions, especially when there is no one to ask.

“When I experienced menstruation for the first time, I didn’t know anything about it or what to do about it. My mother wasn’t at home. My father was at home. But I couldn’t tell my father about it. So, I searched for a remedy on the internet. I

knew that my mother and my sister use sanitary napkins. But I didn't know how to use those. So, I sought help on the internet. I also had a severe stomach ache. So, I searched Google for a remedy and found that I could use a hot bag to reduce the pain."

Even though adolescents were using information from the internet to form their opinions, girls from rural schools said that it is not appreciated by their parents. One said that "I can't express my opinion on matters that are considered as adults' business. They don't approve of it. They say that it is not right to interfere with grownups when they are talking." Adolescents also felt that they could use the internet to ignite their future aspirations, for example, to set up their own businesses. However, an examination of all the interviews of the adolescents reveals that boys are more likely to specifically link their future aspirations with their knowledge or use of ICT than girls.

Another impact on aspirations is from adolescents' engagement with online social movements. For example, nearly all the adolescents in our research were aware of the Safe Roads Movement. This started as an online movement in 2018, started by the adolescents, instigated by the death of many school students in road accidents in recent times and the absence of proper driving licenses and maintenance of traffic regulations. Such involvements have the potential to open up the world to the adolescents and make them realize that they can take part in bringing social changes. They can also widen their horizons as to the kind of engagements that they aspire to.

"I want to be a part of movements against child marriage, dowry, eve-teasing, etc. I will get involved by telling my friends. I would let them know through a Facebook post. Yes, after that different people will discuss it and share different opinions about how to proceed with such movements."

—Girl, Class VIII, rural school

Unfortunately, most parents and schools were not interested in developing these interests in adolescents and were exclusively focused on their doing well in studies. However, our study found that the internet can have a positive impact on the voice and agency of adolescents,

which can increase their self-confidence and aspiration. This may lead to positive outcomes in their personal growth, which can support better learning. These positive impacts should be highlighted to the gatekeepers such as parents and teachers so that they are motivated to encourage adolescents to make the best use of digital technologies and use the virtual sphere as a means of constructive engagement.

Gatekeepers' have an important role in building safe environments for adolescents' mobile and internet use.

Adolescents from all socio-economic backgrounds reported facing harassment online, and the two most common types of harassments reported are: "blackmail" and "opening fake accounts and spreading rumours or pictures." Online harassment is predominantly experienced by girls, as reported by both girls and boys. Adolescents are able to identify the negative impact of mobile and ICT use, and the various types of risks that they face online. Some adolescents showed personal agency in terms of being able to minimize vulnerability to online risks and control their own risky online behaviour, but this agency is in many ways shaped by the gatekeepers in their lives who influence their ICT usage.

A common pattern that emerged in our research is the tendency of parents and teachers to "protect" adolescents from the harmful effects of the internet and digital technology by heavily monitoring and restricting their access. Although it is commendable that the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has made it mandatory for secondary schools to have multimedia classrooms and computer labs, usage is often restricted not only because of lack of resources, but also because of these perceptions. For example, although the computer lab in the Bengali medium school had Wi-Fi, students were not allowed to use the internet.

"I don't let them have access to the internet in the lab because some odd pictures or scenes might appear on the screen if they open the browser while connected to the internet. It will be embarrassing for them, as well as for us.

—Teacher, bengali medium school

So, the strategy to “protect” the students means that they do not get the opportunity to browse, search, or navigate their way around the internet on a computer. Moreover, this protection does not allow adolescents to develop the personal agency that would minimize their vulnerability to online risks. Therefore, while stakeholders and gatekeepers have a key role in building a safe environment for adolescents’ mobile and internet use, they should ensure that the adolescents gain their voice and agency while doing so.

To begin with, parents of adolescents need to be better oriented with effective use of ICT and digital tools. They need to be educated about the positive links between education and internet use and need for equal access to the internet by both their daughters and sons. Parents also have to be educated about the risky online behaviour and how to manage online risks. In Bangladesh, parental digital literacy is a precondition for ensuring that the children use the internet safely.

Secondly, schools have an important role in enabling students to benefit from ICT through introducing sites where adolescents can find help with certain subjects, encouraging the use of the internet in doing research, and educating students about online risks such as ICT-related violence. Schools can also play a role in constructively enhancing adolescent voice and agency in social and global issues.

Finally, government policies have a role to play in ensuring resources, both physical and human (in terms of trained teachers) to all schools. The government’s ICT policy on introducing computer labs and multi-media classrooms is a step in the right direction to engage adolescents with ICT. However, this has to be accompanied with comprehensive teacher training on ICT and, in particular, on using ICT in education. The government also has to institute stronger measures or controls that make it more difficult for under-aged children to access age-inappropriate materials and protect them from online risks.

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POLICY BRIEF

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