OXFAM NOVIB'S GUIDE TO YOUTH-LED RESEARCH
METHODOLOGY AND APPLICABILITY LESSONS

Youth-led research applies a model in which young people become researchers and are directly involved and engaged in all stages of the research process. This booklet summarises the methodology used and the applicability lessons drawn from one such youth-led research experience. We hope this guide will be useful for practitioners, researchers and others interested in implementing such an approach.

Youth at the centre: guiding methodology in youth-led research

About youth-led research

Youth-led research involves the **meaningful and central participation of young people in all phases of a research project**, from identifying relevant learning questions and methodologies, drafting a study design, data collection, and analysis to reflecting on results and projecting new ways forward. Typically, topics centre around issues that are important to young people and have a direct impact on their lives.

The focus is on the **lived experiences and stories of young people and those around them as they relate, interpret, and share them**. Aligned with Oxfam's commitment to promoting initiatives that are **'for youth and by youth,'** the main objective is to place young people at the centre of development processes that directly concern them from which they are, however, often excluded.

Youth-led research can serve a dual purpose: **empowering youth and informing programmatic responses**. It is a participatory model in which young people are the main researchers and actively shape all stages of the research process, following Oxfam's approach of youth-led evaluation.[1] This way, young people and their perceptions and experiences are placed at the centre of the research process as they determine the scope, needs, and actions of a research or a programme intervention.

Key considerations while designing a youth-led research project

- The research is **not an activity that is done for young people**. Rather, it is a process that is **done by young people** with support and guidance from mentors.

- Young people are given the space **to express their curiosity and the issues they wish to explore and tell their** stories the way they see fit.

- The topics to be approached in the project (particularly the sensitive ones) are introduced with the utmost respect for the participating youth's **abilities, context, and culture.**

- The **protection of young people**, including their physical safety and mental health, is guaranteed throughout the process, and a **risk assessment** is necessary to evaluate potential trauma exposure.

- **Do No Harm principles** are observed at all times, entailing sustained consideration of the positive and negative impacts of research in the lives of participating young people and their communities.

- The entire process is organised with **the best interest of young people in mind**. The intent should be to let young people, while in an optimal environment for learning, identify their interests and challenges and following their lead throughout the research process. In practical terms, this would involve planning the workshop sessions and data collection schedule, keeping in mind the researchers' school schedule, household commitments, and other considerations.

- The youth-led research process is **embedded in the community** that it serves. To that end, those leading the project should maintain a dialogue with local residents and organisations about the initiative, its main objectives, and expected results - a process that can help mitigate ethical and safety concerns.

How does Oxfam Novib's youth-led research process look?

Preparatory activities
Once the overarching topic of investigation and the area of implementation are chosen, in-country coordinators are selected using a structured assessment and selection process. The primary criterion for the selection of the in-country coordinators is experience and expertise in engaging young people.

Once the coordinators are selected, they are formally introduced to the research theme and the envisioned research process. The blueprint of the curriculum for the young researchers (described in the coming passages) is shared with the coordinator to get their inputs and feedback and contextualise it to the research theme and the on-the-ground circumstances. Coordinators are expected to involve young people in this process so that the curriculum is truly **co-created** and **fit-for-context**. If felt necessary, the coordinators (and their team) could also be provided with additional training and guidance on engaging young people, ensuring their meaningful participation.

The curriculum
Oxfam Novib's youth-led research curriculum draws inspiration from various relevant sources and the experiences of several organisations (see list of cited works), including previous initiatives by Oxfam, while introducing new ideas and directions in content, process, and action.

The curriculum revolves around a ten-week process that includes **five workshops** and activities outside the classroom, involving **data collection, reflection, and sharing**. The material in each workshop is presented gradually through **information** (to introduce

concepts and themes), **action** (to spark participatory learning), and **reflection** (to encourage discussion and knowledge sharing). In practice, **experimental activities**, such as role-playing, games, visualisation, and problem-solving tasks, help keep the training interesting and interactive.

Below, we provide an overview of the different workshops' content and research activities outside the classroom. It is important to reiterate that the curriculum described below serves as a blueprint or perhaps a source of inspiration. The final curriculum should be reviewed along with future participants and in-country coordinators. Furthermore, it is vital to document the research process and record the feedback from the youth researchers and country coordinators. These documentation and reflection formats should be shared with the country coordinators in advance. This ensures that the research process and the engagement with the youth researchers are informed by the scope of the research and the documentation requirements.

Workshop 1: Introduction to project and research	**INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT** Participants are introduced to each other and the project. Furthermore, objectives are clarified, and the motivations and expectations of the young people involved are explored. **INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH** Participants are introduced to the basics of research. **PROBLEM ANALYSIS AND TOPIC SELECTION** With support from the research coordinators, young researchers contextualise and identify the most important and relevant issues around the main topic under investigation. **IDENTIFYING TARGET POPULATION** Young researchers identify the relevant target groups within the population with whom they will engage in fulfilling their research objectives. **UNDERSTANDING ETHICS IN RESEARCH** Young researchers are familiarised with the principles of research ethics and the issue of bias in research. **EXPLORING POWER IMBALANCES IN RESEARCH** Young researchers are made aware of the possible power imbalances in research and how to manage them. **MANAGING TRAUMA EXPOSURE** Young researchers are informed what trauma is and to identify potentially traumatic situations, mitigate their effects, and who to reach out to for support.

Workshop 2: Introduction to research methods and tools

Figure 1: A workshop on research methods and tools in Mali

FORMULATE RESEARCH QUESTIONS
Young researchers are guided on how to formulate appropriate research questions based on the identified topic of investigation.

EXPLORING DATA COLLECTION METHODS
Young researchers are familiarised with different research methods in a manner that helps them envision which approaches they wish to use in their study.

DESIGNING DATA COLLECTION TOOLS
Young researchers are advised on designing data collection tools most appropriate to answer the research question and sub-questions.

REQUESTING INFORMED CONSENT
Young researchers are introduced to the concept and importance of informed consent and how to collect it.

INTERVIEW APPROACHES AND PRACTICE EXERCISE
Young researchers 'try out' what it is like to be an interviewer and experience what it feels like to be in the interviewee's position.

Pilot study

The pilot study constitutes a one-week practice activity during which young researchers put their data collection plan into practice as they see fit. For example, a young researcher may choose to interview a group of friends or siblings. Allowing 'room for error,' the goal of this activity is to demystify the research process and increase young people's confidence by having them practise concepts introduced during the workshops and observe how interviewees react and respond to their research questions and approaches.

Workshop 3: Reflection on pilot study and refining of research tools

Figure 2: Pre-data collection discussion in Ethiopia

REFLECTING ON FIELD EXPERIENCE
Young researchers share accounts of their pilot study experience and report the most surprising and difficult aspects of it, anticipating possible issues that may emerge during the data collection process.

FINE-TUNING RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND TOOLS
If needed, young researchers adapt their research questions and preferred methods based on their pilot study experience.

Figure 3: Youth researchers with the India country coordinator

Data collection

A two-week period during which young researchers collect data to answer their research questions. This period involves directly engaging with their chosen target group(s) in different settings and gathering their insights in various forms, as per their method of choice. Ready access to guidance and support from the youth-led research coordinator is particularly crucial during this period. This includes providing support with the overall fieldwork process, coordinating approval requests and consents, and identifying potentially sensitive issues.

Workshop 4: Data analysis

Figure 4: Data analysis process in Mali

ORGANISING THE DATA
With coordinators facilitating their approach to - and sensemaking of - the available data sets, young researchers organise their data and conduct its initial analysis.

ANALYSING THE DATA
Young researchers identify key themes and findings emerging from their data.

REFLECTING ON EARLY FINDINGS
Young researchers reflect on their early findings and bring forth an analysis plan to finalise the work.

Drafting the final product

Over one or two weeks, young researchers combine the collected data, analyse it further, and prepare their final findings document. If necessary, the researchers can decide to collect additional data that they deem missing or think can add to the richness of the analyses. This starts by drawing the main conclusions and recommendations from the collected data that the researchers would like to share in advance of their presentation. Simultaneously, they are expected to critically reflect on the research itself. During this process, the young researchers identify what they learnt and what the challenges were. Finally, they formulate feedback and recommendations for future youth-led research projects.

Presentation of study findings and youth-actions

Young researchers present their findings through their choice of 'youth actions,' and in other formats they deem fit, to ground the study findings in context, raise awareness, and foster community support for change-making. These youth actions are to be decided on by the researchers themselves and should be oriented towards the communities where the research was conducted (not towards project partners and external audiences).

Youth-led research in practice

As part of the More Than Brides Alliance Learning Project, youth-led research trajectories were carried out in five countries: Ethiopia, India, Mali, Nepal, and Pakistan. The broad research focus was to understand the linkages between female adolescent sexuality and child marriage. Within this broad theme, young researchers in the five countries (with support from Oxfam and country coordinators) chose the research focus, data collection tools, data analysis, and drawing conclusions and relevant lessons learned.

Each research trajectory, the research projects in each of the five countries, explored the journeys of young girls and women (14-18 years old) as they navigated the social norms and practices around adolescent sexuality and early marriage. This exploration was not limited to the young women themselves; it extended to stakeholders in their social circle who have significant influence and impact on the lives and journeys of these young women.

In line with Oxfam's youth-led research learning curriculum, support was provided to young researchers to enrich their research knowledge and capacities, therefore building on their strengths and adding to a more comprehensive package of competencies. In line with the approach of placing youth at the front and centre of the research process and giving them the freedom to tell their stories the way they see fit, the research teams themselves chose their research topics, inquiry areas, methodologies, and respondents.

In total, 73 youth researchers were part of the research process in the five countries. They conducted 309 interviews and 26 focus groups and collected several 'life stories' among young women and men, parents, teachers, religious leaders, community members, and other relevant stakeholders. The research trajectories in the five countries are presented in Figure 5.[2]

As the research process was being undertaken, the coordination team, led by the country coordinators, conducted regular check-ins with the young researchers to understand how they found the research process. The documentation formats shared with the in-country coordinators were helpful in recording and collating the reflections of the researchers. Some of the findings from the reflections and inputs from the young researchers are presented below:

A learning opportunity that enabled a sense of purpose

According to the young researchers, the learning process began with the training and the workshops intended to prepare them for the research process. Apart from being a primer on undertaking research, these events were also perceived as life-skills training opportunities. When reflecting on what they learnt from the research process, the youth researchers stated several 'how tos' they had picked up. For example, how to: design research, collect data and analyse the collected data, communicate with different people, or extract information from those who are unwilling and hesitant.

I learned the methods of data collection. I developed my skills on how to extract information from people on certain subjects. **Youth Researcher, Pakistan**

I have improved my communication skills with the youth and problem-solving skills. **Youth Researcher, Ethiopia**

Most of the young researchers feel that their vocabulary, writing, and reading skills have improved significantly as a result of these activities. **Research Coordinator, Mali**

The research process helped the young researchers explore the norms, traditions, beliefs, and attitudes prevalent in their communities concerning the position of girls in society, in general, and early marriage, in particular.

YOUTH-LED RESEARCH TOPICS, tools, respondents, findings and MINI-ACTIONS

	Ethiopia	India	Mali	Nepal	Pakistan
Topic	Main causes and factors of child marriage	Relation between girls' education and adolescent female sexuality	Norms about adolescent sexuality	Perceptions relating to child marriage and sexual harassment	Linkages between child marriage, female adolescence, and sexuality
Tools	In-depth interviews and focused group discussions	In-depth interviews	In-depth interviews and focused group discussions	In-depth interviews	In-depth interviews and focused group discussions
Respondents	Young women, community and religious leaders, parents, health workers, officials	Young women	Young women, village elders, parents	Young women	Young women, mothers, female health workers, teachers
Findings	Internal factors leading to child marriage: economic hardships, desire for honourable status, legacy through grandchildren, protection of daughters (from unwanted pregnancy, sexual assault), conduct of girls. External factors: pressure from community elders and religious leaders and practice of child marriage by others	Controlling female sexuality is a major cause of school dropout. The urge to control sexuality is driven by notions of shame and honour associated with pre-marital sexual activity and the need to 'protect' girls from sexual violence. Ideas of protection, shame, and honour emerge from the belief that girls do not belong to their parental home	The main condition for sexual activity is marriage. A girl who begins her sexual life before marriage brings shame to her family. Giving away the girl in marriage is considered the only way to wash away any 'affront.' Early marriage used as coercive measure to suppress girls' 'delinquency' or any sign of defiance so as to maintain family image	A rise in self-initiated child marriage is being observed. One of the main causes is the desire for happiness - as adolescent girls lack love, care, acceptance, and support from family. Other factors include peer influence, lack of education and poverty. Respondents are aware of the consequences of early marriage	Adolescent girls withdraw into themselves due to increased attention from others because of physical changes owing to puberty. Girls' mobility and social lives are impacted as they stop interacting with others, especially men. Despite awareness of physical and mental health impacts of early marriages, it is a common practice
Mini-actions	Present findings to officials, community and CSOs who design interventions	Organised an exhibition of findings and performed a street play where the research was undertaken	Researchers presented the findings to the administrative and local authorities of the community	Street-theatre where the research was undertaken	Share findings with policy-makers, practitioners, and community members

Many young researchers saw their participation in the research process as their contribution to the elimination of early marriage. Some young women expressed that the research helped them build the necessary knowledge base and skills to become more active and work towards becoming part of the solution.

I learned that some girls are very different from how we think, how they have struggled a lot in their lives. And there are also some parents who do not let their daughter study. **Youth Researcher, India**

I would see the issues around child marriages and sexuality, but I never got to know the factors behind them. After the interviews, I learned the reasons behind these issues and what can be the possible solutions. **Youth Researcher, Pakistan**

Learning and enjoyment hand-in-hand

For the young researchers involved, the project was part research and part enjoyable venture. On the one hand, the research was an activity that involved interactions with their peers, both fellow researchers and respondents. On the other hand, the process was a parents-sanctioned exercise that allowed them to step out of their homes.

I enjoyed visiting new places and meeting new people, talking to them, and listening to their stories. People gave me a lot of respect. **Youth Researcher, Pakistan**

There was a change in our life that we did not leave the house before, but now we go anywhere **Youth Researcher, India**

According to feedback from the young researchers, the training and workshops, the opportunities to step out and interact with their community members, and the resultant enhancement in skills and a sense of purpose contributed to an enriched sense of self. Many of them stated that they are more confident now and can self-assuredly express themselves. Some termed the research as a life-changing process that has taught them valuable life lessons.

I have learned to give focus on various issues and that empathy is highly required. This will help me in my education and professional and social life. **Youth researcher, Ethiopia**

We learned how to talk to people, how to talk to parents, and how to understand them. And we can apply at home how to talk to parents and how to talk to the people of society. At first, I was afraid to ask anything from anyone. Now, I am not afraid to talk to anyone or if anyone asks anything. **Youth researcher, India**

Many young researchers stated that this activity has created an excitement to go further in their studies and especially to become a professional researcher. They feel that they have learned a lot of information to help their own children in the future. **Research coordinator, Mali**

As challenging as it was fruitful

Engaging with their parents and guardians and those of the intended respondents was discussed by nearly all young researchers in the five countries. For many researchers, especially in Pakistan, India and Nepal, participating in the data collection process was fraught with challenges. Either they found it difficult to engage with their parents and convince them to let them step out of the house to participate in the research. Or they struggled to find someone to accompany them, in the event of their parents agreeing to let them participate in the research.

Going for interviews was a difficult part for me. I was not allowed to go for interviews alone; I had to take my mother along. Most of the time, my mother would be busy with domestic chores, and I had to wait for her for hours. I then started helping her complete the work so that she could get free and take me to the interview. **Youth Researcher, Pakistan**

Reservations on the part of the parents and guardians were also partly due to the need for the young researchers to efficiently manage their school schedules, and in some cases, even their household chores and other responsibilities, while straddling the training, workshops, and data collection processes. Some participants also stated that they were required to complete the research process within a fixed amount of time, creating its own set of challenges. Although time management was difficult, researchers stated that they were eventually successful in managing these competing priorities.

Going for interviews during the week was difficult because I had to go to college and do my assignments. However, in order to complete the set number of interviews within the planned time, I would do more interviews over the weekend. **Youth Researcher, Pakistan**

However, at times, the respondents' parents and guardians appeared wary of the intentions of the research and the researchers themselves. However, nearly all the researchers who mentioned this challenge stated that, more often than not, they were able to convince their parent or guardian, indicating their ability to think on their feet and put their problem solving and communication skills to use.

The most difficult thing was to make the parents understand and tell them all the details of why we are doing this work and the benefit for all of us girls. Only then did the parents agree. **Youth researcher, India**

Implementing your own youth-led research: Applicability lessons

Manage expectations and potential disagreements
It is very likely that while implementing youth-led research, the facilitating organisation has divergent opinions about (or perhaps disagrees completely on) the scope of research, questions, methods, or even the findings and recommendations. It is important to be prepared for such eventualities and manage expectations and communication accordingly.

It is even more important to remember that the primary aim of any youth-led research should be to ensure young people's voices are included in research and project implementation. Therefore, the focus should be on letting the youth chart their own path to understand the issues within their community and the research findings they undertake and ensure a space where they decide how to turn their understanding into action.

Keep it flexible
During the reflection process, some young researchers stated that they perceived the timelines for the current research project to be tight. They expressed that they would have been more satisfied with the research process if they had more time.

This feedback drove home the need to keep in mind that youth-led research relies heavily on the availability of the participating young people. Not only do they have to manage their school schedule, but they are also dependent on their parents or guardians' approval and support to participate in the research process. Unlike formal research assignments involving time and cost considerations and engaging professional researchers, youth-led research must incorporate sufficient scope for flexibility. The research process must not become burdensome or strenuous for the researchers.

Constant assessment of safety and well-being of researchers

None of the young researchers stated having encountered any threat or danger. Regardless, looking forwards, the safety and well-being of young people are never to be taken for granted in any situation, be it in safe or precarious social contexts.

Regular check-ins with the researchers and ensuring any issues they face – mobility, availability, parental concerns etc. – are addressed should take precedence over the delivery of the research outcomes. The training of in-country coordinators should focus specifically on keeping track of the well-being of the young researchers and building their capacity to handle any issues or incidents that involve young researchers and the respondents. Furthermore, adolescent safety and protection principles should be incorporated into every aspect of the research process, and the related protocols must be reviewed at regular intervals.

Variety in guidance and mentorship

The expertise and experience of the in-country coordinators are essential to ensure that the research processes go smoothly. However, by donning the multiple hats of a mentor, facilitator, coordinator, trouble-shooter, in-country coordinators could risk becoming deeply involved and invested in the research process. This could impact their ability to objectively guide the young researchers, especially when analysing the findings and formulating recommendations and future actions.

In the current project, there were comprehensive training sessions for both in-country coordinators and youth researchers. However, it is recommended to have more people involved in the research process, such as those who have significant experience and expertise in engaging with youth as trainers, mentors, and facilitators. This larger network can help the researchers objectively review the findings (and the research process itself), critically analyse them (and their responses and biases), and arrive at objective conclusions.

Striking a balance between freedom and parity of objectives

This aspect is particularly relevant for multi-country, youth-led research projects. The wide nature of an overarching subject and the freedom for the researchers to choose their research topic could mean that the scope of research across countries varies widely. This could affect the comparability of data.

The emphasis on freedom to choose the research theme, methodologies, and tools is a vital characteristic of the youth-led research philosophy. However, at the same time, it is important to strike a balance between the freedom to choose and the parity of objectives. Furthermore, the researchers could be encouraged to narrow the scope of their research. This way, the researchers can undertake a truly in-depth exploration of the research theme without running the risk of spreading themselves out thin.

In conclusion

While designing the youth-led research process, data collection was considered more of an incidental outcome. We hoped that the research process - the learning, skills and experiences - would foster a sense of purpose and translate into an enhanced sense of self. Many challenges were encountered during this journey. These complications - as we see them - did not overshadow the benefits. The feedback from the young researchers makes us confident in this assertion.

REFERENCES

[1] *Youth-led evaluation guide developed by the Work in Progress alliance which is part of Oxfam Novib.*
[2] *Please refer to _insert link to MMWWK website_ for the detailed findings*

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