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# **Silent Lions: Experiences of voice and collective power among adolescent girls and boys affected by conflict and violence in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey**

Findings from arts-based research using collective songwriting and poetry

31 December 2021

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# 1. Executive summary

In mid-2021, Save the Children Middle East and Eastern Europe Regional Office engaged the University of Melbourne to conduct arts-based research to explore adolescent experiences of ‘voice’ and collective power in the region. Save the Children Country Offices in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq convened twelve workshop groups of adolescent girls and boys aged 14 to 19 years of age, all of whom were refugees or impacted by displacement, discrimination, exclusion, and economic disadvantage. In creative workshops devised by the arts-based research team Dr Gillian Howell (The University of Melbourne) and composer and workshop facilitator Mr Ameen Mokdad (Iraq/Turkey), the adolescents explored their experiences of voice and collective power through discussion, metaphor, poetic expression, and songwriting. The workshops took place in November and December 2021, and involved adolescents of Syrian, Palestinian, and Jordanian backgrounds in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. The song lyrics and ideas shared in the workshops were analysed inductively by the workshop participants, workshop team, and researcher to identify key experiences of voice and voicelessness, barriers, and opportunities.

The research goal was to better understand the opportunities for and inhibitors of strong adolescent voices in the region. By understanding the adolescents’ lived experiences of voice and collective power through their first-hand experiences, Save the Children aimed to identify constructive strategies for supporting youth empowerment and agency and addressing the barriers to adolescents’ meaningful participation. These strategies are intended to guide the second phase of Save the Children’s program for adolescent boys and girls, *Al Bawsala II*, scheduled to start in 2022. A second important objective was to document the key learnings that emerged from using arts-based, participatory methods with adolescents affected by conflict and violence, for potential replication.

## 1.1. What was meant by ‘voice’? How was it explored?

‘Voice’ in this research is understood metaphorically as the capacity to speak (to vocalise thoughts, ideas, and experiences), to be listened to or make yourself heard, and to be able to contribute your voice in matters that concern or affect you. While we all have a voice, not everyone enjoys these capacities. Exploring adolescent experiences of voice, therefore, involves examining the conditions under which these capacities are produced, maintained, strengthened, and constrained. It is shaped through everyday practices and often reinforced through social norms and institutional structures. Someone who is able to speak and make themselves heard can be said to ‘have a voice’, while someone who struggles to make themselves heard can be said to ‘lack’ voice, or be experiencing voicelessness or silencing. In this way, the concept of voice is socially situated and produced. It is closely entwined with power dynamics, making it a useful lens through which to consider aspects of power, influence, and authority in social settings.<sup>1</sup>

To capture the variety of ways that voice and social relationships intersect and diverge, an ecological perspective was applied.<sup>2</sup> The research team developed a socio-ecological model that located adolescent experiences of voice across five key sets of relationships: in the family; among friendship groups; online; at school, work, or other institutions involving direct interactions; and the wider society and its cultural norms. The workshop participants were invited to consider and share stories about their experience of voice—as a ‘strong voice’ and a ‘low, weak or quiet’ voice in each dimension. Some groups also considered a sixth dimension, that of the *internal* voice. As they shared their experiences, the adolescents chose metaphoric labels that could capture the essence of the vocal experience they had described. These metaphors and other descriptive labels then formed the basis of a song or poem that the workshop group composed together. Some participants retained a more literal conceptualisation of ‘strong voice’ and ‘low voice’, to mean the volume at which they were able to speak. But this still correlated with the power dynamics of the social space, as the acceptability of shouting or voice-raising corresponds with the amount of social power and authority one holds in that space.

In the findings discussed in this report, ‘voice’ refers to adolescents’ experiences of being able to speak (being given space and time), having others listen to them and engage with what they say, and being able to use their voice to

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<sup>1</sup> Juffermans, K., & Van der Aa, J. (2013). Introduction to the Special Issue: Analyzing Voice in Educational Discourses. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 44(2), 112–123. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12010>

<sup>2</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32(7), 513–531. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.32.7.513>

influence matters that affect them. ‘The vocal space’ refers to the metaphorical space that voices can occupy, in order to consider both *where* adolescents’ voices are invited and included, and *the amount* of space/time they are able to occupy, in relation to other people.

## 1.2. What was learned?

Repeatedly in this research, it was shown that having a strong voice was connected to being higher in the social hierarchy (within the family, the school, the community, etc.), while weak voices were associated with being low in the social hierarchy.

These hierarchies are multi-factorial and intersectional in that the interplay of different factors (such as gender discrimination, age discrimination, the family’s economic security, the family’s cultural or social capital, etc.) is what determines the amount of voice an adolescent may experience in a particular context, rather than a single factor. This makes it difficult to generalise about which factors are the greatest inhibitors. This nuance notwithstanding, there were unambiguous patterns associated with gender, where girls faced many obstacles within the family and social contexts to being able to speak, have influence, and be heard, due to social norms that undervalue girls’ contributions and limit or regulate their vocal space. For adolescent boys, vocal space was often predicated on their ability to lead or hold authority over others (by virtue of recognition of their superior skills or other leadership qualities, or through being older and taking on adult responsibilities within the family).

Through the discussions, metaphors, and songs, three clear messages emerged:

### “We are silent lions”

Adolescent Syrians, Jordanians, and Palestinians in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey see themselves as filled with potential. They understand that their voices could be as strong and loud as a lion’s (an animal nominated by both girls and boys to represent their potential voice), but they repeatedly experience their voices and their attempts to speak being constrained or silenced by multiple external forces. They are rendered voiceless through other people’s behaviours, some of which are conscious strategies of silencing, but many of which are products of highly stressful lives: traumatic pasts, the precarious and unjust present, and uncertain futures.

Adolescent voices are further constrained by social norms that reinforce unjust power dynamics and hierarchies, leading to the normalisation of dominance, coercion, and force—behaviours that preserve vocal space for those higher in the hierarchy, such as adults and older boys. Position in the sibling birth order also affects adolescents’ experiences of voice and voicelessness in the family (i.e., being the oldest can be advantageous, but more so for boys than for girls; being the youngest or middle child can be disadvantageous). Violence in the home and in the family further creates conditions that silence the voices of adolescents.

Notably, the research showed that adolescent experiences of voice are gendered. Restrictive and rigid norms pertaining to acceptable social roles for young woman significantly impact their ability to speak, be heard, and be taken seriously in most of their social domains. Older girls (aged 16–19 years) found that their voices carried progressively less authority the older they became, particularly in the family. This was the opposite of their male counterparts’ experience. Violence and harassment permeate all aspects of daily life, but responsibility for avoiding this (or blame for being the victim of it) rests with the girls. The risk of violence is also used as a reason why girls might be required to stay within the family home or the local neighbourhood, thus limiting their freedoms and their access to additional spaces where their voices might flourish.

One girl (14–15 years, Lebanon) likened her voice to an endangered animal, a metaphor that vividly conjures the urgency of the matter. Without immediate action, endangered species, like endangered voices, will disappear.

### “Just listen to me!”

Adolescents are speaking but they feel that no-one is listening. They are trying to be heard, but the above factors effectively block or lower the volume of their voices and reduce the vocal space they can occupy.

The workshop team heard about and saw evidence of non-verbal attempts to speak. This included: overt refusal to speak, as a form of protest or defiance; removal of oneself from education as a way to ‘speak back’ to violence or disrespect from teachers; physical fighting in response to unjust behaviour or in defence of one’s friends; and, in the

case of one girl, self-harm in the form of cutting. These strategies rarely help the adolescents be heard, and only disadvantage them. They are the protest strategies of the powerless.

Related to the issue of listening is the issue of trust. Both girls and boys in all the workshop sites told of experiences where they had confided in someone they trusted, only to have that person share their secrets with others. This was experienced as a betrayal and was cited as a reason to keep their hopes, fears, and experiences of injustice to themselves. This avoidance pattern increases the adolescents' feelings of isolation and voicelessness, and presents a significant obstacle to the possibility of working collectively with their peers towards a shared goal.

### **“We only need a little bit of support”**

Repeatedly, the research showed that adolescents desire independence and autonomy, but they need just a little bit of support from the collective community. They are asking for a metaphoric boost to help them get over a high hurdle; adolescents believe they will be able to land safely on their two feet if they are just given a little support at the key moments. They want to be able to make mistakes and learn from them, to be trusted, and to be given opportunities to work towards social change that matters to them. Many would like to break the cycles of violence, harassment, and dominance, but feel somewhat powerless and unsure of how to begin.

Working collectively is a key step; but while some adolescents had already experienced this and spoke positively about its potential, the lack of trust in family members, peers, and authority figures that some adolescents described is a significant hurdle to building a culture of collective action.

## **1.3. Opportunities and recommendations**

The report concludes with seven recommendations, each of which engages with the critical adolescent project of self-actualisation and identity development, and that take critical consciousness as the foundation for new actions and initiatives. The suggestions include:

### **Positive social influencers**

Harness the power of social media and many adolescents' desire to use these platforms to build both visibility and audibility. Support adolescents to become 'positive social influencers', creating unique and cool content for sharing on social media platforms that is grounded in their passions (e.g., freestyle, football) and helps transmit key messages.

### **Free thinkers**

Adolescence is a time of self-discovery, experimentation, and self-actualisation. Many adolescents have a self-conception that values authenticity and being true to oneself, rather than being one of a (conforming) crowd. Develop language for marketing and describing adolescent programming that taps into their desire to be a free thinker by using language that invites them to connect with 'like-minded others' through programs for 'people who think differently'.

### **Critically engaged social citizens**

Adolescents are frustrated that their schooling does not invite them to engage with the rapidly changing world. Many are participating in political commentary online or in their friendship groups. Support them to develop critical thinking and communication skills through citizen journalism programs that involve critical engagement with current local issues and skills development in crafting stories, writing for different audiences, and public speaking or broadcasting. This in turn recognises and invests in their desire to be engaged civic actors in their communities.

### **Non-violent communicators**

Adolescents have limited (if any) opportunities to influence decisions that affect them, due to their low status in the current social hierarchies and the correspondingly limited vocal space they receive. An important initial step, therefore, is to ensure they have the skills to use the available vocal space effectively, without generating conflict. Offer training that uses creative methods (e.g., role-play, Forum Theatre) to build skills in non-violent and strategic

communication. This will help them prepare and rehearse for 'difficult conversations' with family, teachers, employers, siblings, and community leaders, and give them greater agency and voice in issues that concern them.

#### **Approach collective action in small but incremental ways**

Part of collective power is being encouraged by others to think of small acts that you can do that could bring about a small change in one space. Explore activities that look to create change through small incremental actions. The participants could be working as 'action researchers'. This could be implemented or supported through an app, where participants sign up to a daily or weekly 'challenge' and use the app to track their collective participation and progress. The app could send a daily prompt of a small, related action (initiating a conversation, writing down goals, supporting someone, etc.). Working via mobile technologies would help to give access for girls who are given little freedom of movement outside the home.

#### **Include adolescent perspectives in positive parenting programs**

Encourage parents and other caregivers and institutional leaders to support adolescent development in ways that recognise their child's growing capabilities, social motivations, and need for autonomy and voice and that offer appropriate supports. Adolescents know that they still need the support of parents and other adults, but this should be scaffolded support that enables their healthy independence.

#### **Address the issue of mistrust through further research**

This research has revealed that lack of trust is a major barrier to adolescents' likely engagement with collective action and, therefore, their access to collective power. More needs to be understood about adolescent experiences of trust in settings of conflict, displacement, and instability, including how trust intersects with the experience of being a refugee or living in precarious contexts, and with adolescent development. Which age groups are the most likely allies for adolescents when engaging in collective action? Participatory arts-based research, as a democratic and relational approach to research, is recommended as a well-matched approach that is oriented towards social change. The focus on art creation can be particularly effective in engaging with marginalised people and those whose voices are often silenced or overridden, as it invites participants to bring all their knowledges, skills, and creative assets to the task and embraces text-based, symbol-based, verbal, sonic, embodied, and affective ways of communicating.

## 2. Project overview

### 2.1. Background and context

This research has been commissioned by the Middle East and Eastern Europe Regional Office of Save the Children International, an international non-government organisation committed to ensuring that the world's most vulnerable children are protected, can realise their human rights, and can learn and flourish through access to education and life skills learning. It responds to the ongoing political instability, economic fragility, and protracted conflict situations in the Middle East, and the extremely limited sense of control and agency that many young people there feel they have in their lives.

Research conducted by Save the Children in 2019 found that young people in the Middle East contend with multiple and constant forms of violence in their lives—in their schools, homes, and communities. They have few avenues available to them through which to call for justice and make their voices heard.<sup>3</sup> The young people consulted in that earlier research believed that young people have a role to play in preventing violence and confronting injustices but need more constructive pathways and supports to be able to tackle the impact of these adversities and hold duty bearers accountable.<sup>4</sup> Discrimination, injustice, and corruption have been identified by young people as key priorities in the region.<sup>5</sup> Many active youth groups exist, but they largely work in isolation, not utilizing the power of collective action.

Civic engagement and being part of projects that benefit your community also serve a protective function, helping to give young people a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. Meaninglessness is "one of the most enduring existential legacies of conflict,"<sup>6</sup> and along with hopelessness, can destroy agency and individual or collective motivation for constructive, positive action. Without hope and meaning, the motivation to act in constructive ways towards your desired life is diminished, which means the situation remains unchanged, which in turn fuels further hopelessness. This can lead to increasing feelings of powerlessness and exclusion.

This research was positioned to better understand young people's lived experience, in order to disrupt and subvert the negative potential of voicelessness and disempowerment and identify constructive strategies for removing the barriers to their meaningful participation. A second important objective was to document key learnings from using arts-based, participatory methods with adolescents affected by conflict and violence, for potential replication.

### 2.2. Research approach and key questions

Collective songwriting was used to gather the data as it offered a rigorous research approach that could engage adolescents in meaningful and relational ways and avoid the extractive aspect of more traditional research methodologies. Participatory arts-based research methods have been found to be adaptive and flexible approaches to research with young people that can meet the participants' psychosocial needs while also giving them an experience of control over both the process and the outcomes.<sup>7</sup> It was anticipated that the adolescents' engagement with symbolic language, metaphor, and playfulness through the process of writing a song or poem together would provide them with tools for exploring and expressing difficult lived experiences that more direct language and reporting could inhibit.<sup>8</sup> With music already such a prominent part of many young people's expressive lives, collective songwriting offered them a way to explore the theme of voice through the medium of their own voices, a symmetry we hoped would inspire candid insights as well as an experience of 'talking back' to the social forces that can suppress and silence adolescent voices.

The research was designed in response to the following research questions:

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<sup>3</sup> Save The Children (2019). *"I wish tomorrow will not come": Adolescents and the impact of conflict on their experiences: an exploratory study in Iraq, Egypt, Jordan and Yemen*. Published by savethechildren.net

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *Arab Youth Survey 2020*. Retrieved from <https://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Demaria, C., & Wright, C. (2006). What is a post-conflict culture? In C. Demaria & C. Wright (Eds.), *Post-conflict cultures: Rituals of representation*. Zolius Press in association with CTCS Publications.

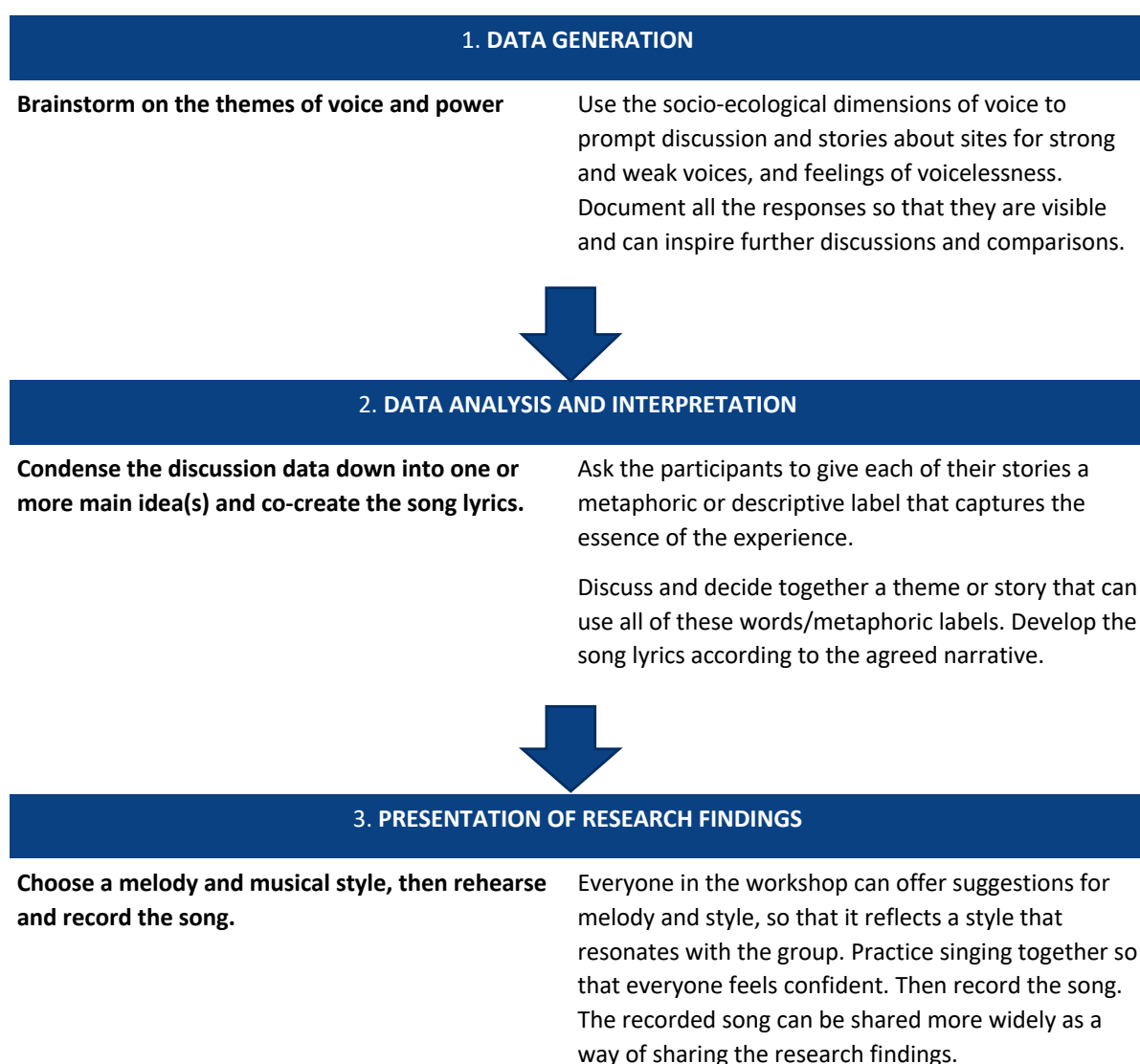
<sup>7</sup> Clacherty, G. (2006). The world in a suitcase: Psychosocial support using artwork with refugee children in South Africa. *Participatory learning and action. Mapping for Change: Practice, Technologies and Communication*, 54, 121–127

<sup>8</sup> Stavropoulou, N. (2019), 'Understanding the "bigger picture": Lessons learned from participatory visual arts-based research with individuals seeking asylum in the United Kingdom', *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, 10(1), 95–118, doi:10.1386/cjmc.10.1.95\_1

- How do adolescents affected by conflict and violence in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan experience 'voice' and collective power?
- What are the barriers (such as power structures, social and gender norms) that limit the agency of adolescents? In particular, how does the experience of violence influence voice, activism, and engagement with power structures?
- What are the opportunities for nurturing greater civic engagement, voice, and agency among adolescents affected by conflict and violence in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan, and in Save the Children's adolescent programs across the Middle East more broadly?

The workshop process yielded data in the form of text, drawings, and song audio. (Section 2.7 describes the songwriting methodology in further detail).

Data analysis took place in two layers. The first analysis layer was participatory and woven into the songwriting process (Figure 1). It involved each participant group surveying the metaphors and stories that had been shared in the discussions and condensing these into a 'main theme' or narrative arc that formed the basis of their collective song or poem.<sup>9</sup> This first analysis functioned as a within-case thematic analysis. The second analysis layer considered the full data set and was an inductive, cross-case thematic analysis, undertaken using NVivo software.



**Figure 1: Songwriting as participatory research methodology, adapted from Fairchild & McFerran (2019), p. 95**

<sup>9</sup> The workshop process was informed by the songwriting-as-research method described in Fairchild, R., & McFerran, K. S. (2019). "Music is everything": Using collaborative group songwriting as an arts-based method with children experiencing homelessness and family violence. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, 28(2), 88–107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08098131.2018.1509106>

### 2.3. Exploring 'voice' and collective power

Conceptually, 'voice' is understood as the capacity to speak (to vocalise thoughts, ideas, and experiences), to be listened to or make yourself heard, and to be able to contribute your voice in matters that concern or affect you. While we all have a voice, not everyone enjoys these capacities. Exploring adolescent experiences of voice, therefore, involves examining the conditions under which these capacities are produced, maintained, strengthened and constrained. It is shaped through everyday practices and often reinforced through social norms and institutional structures. Someone who is able to speak and make themselves heard can be said to 'have a voice', while someone who struggles to make themselves heard can be said to 'lack' voice, or to experience 'denial' of voice, or voicelessness. In this way, the concept of voice is a helpful metaphor for considering aspects of power in social settings.<sup>10</sup>

Collective power was understood as a way of conceptualising the activism and social change that arises from group action. It exists on a spectrum, and can be as simple as organising something as a group, but also includes more political and visible forms of action, such as the effective mobilisation of many individuals towards a collectively determined social-change goal.

While the research adopted a central concept of voice grounded in metaphor, some of the boys retained a more literal conceptualisation, equating a 'strong voice' with the permissible volume of their voice. But this more literal understanding of vocal strength has a metaphoric subtext, as culturally, young people in the Middle East are often expected to keep their voices lower than those of their elders or other authority figures. Being able to shout or raise one's voice, therefore, represents an aspect of freedom and a degree of social authority or control over the space.

In order to capture the variety of ways that voice and social relationships intersect and diverge, an ecological perspective was applied.<sup>11</sup> Dr Howell developed a socio-ecological model that located adolescent experiences of voice across five key sets of relationships: in the family; among friendship groups; online; at school, work, or other institutions involving direct interactions; and the wider society and its cultural norms (Figure 2).

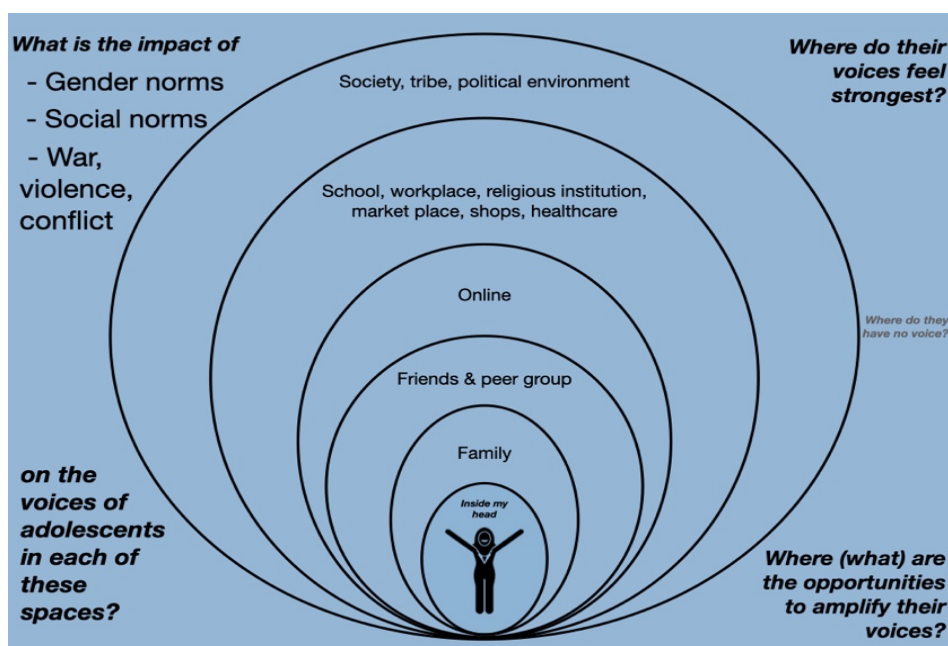


Figure 2: Socio-ecological model for 'voice' in the lives of adolescents (developed by Dr Gillian Howell)

<sup>10</sup> Juffermans, K., & Van der Aa, J. (2013). Introduction to the Special Issue: Analyzing Voice in Educational Discourses. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 44(2), 112–123. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12010>

<sup>11</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32(7), 513–531. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.32.7.513>

## 2.4. Research activities

Twelve songwriting workshops were held to gather data about adolescent experiences of voice and collective power. The songwriting workshops involved a team of 2–3 staff from the Save the Children Country Office working with the external facilitator musician and composer Ameen Mokdad (Iraq/Turkey). All of those involved in workshop staff roles (e.g., co-facilitator, note-taker) took part in two days of remote training three weeks prior to the project start date. In addition, a one-day, in-person staff training and refresher workshop was held in each country prior to the commencement of the adolescent songwriting workshops. The remote training days were led by Dr Gillian Howell, principal investigator for the research, and the in-person training workshops and adolescent songwriting workshops were led by Ameen Mokdad.

- In Lebanon, four songwriting workshops were held in Burj al Barajneh, Beirut.
- In Jordan, six songwriting workshops were held, three in the Za’atari camp, in District 4 Zumorda Centre and District 10 in Arsenal Fans Centre; and three in East Amman, in Nawares Alrahman SCJ mobile unit, and the CBO Johud Centre for community support.
- In Turkey, two songwriting workshops were held in Esenyurt SCI Community Centre, Istanbul.

Given the length of the workshops (3–4.5 hours) and brief timeframe available for data analysis, it was decided not to record and transcribe the discussions, as the time required to get these recordings transcribed and translated into English was not available. Therefore, the workshop staff followed a note-taking protocol introduced in the remote training and took brief notes throughout the workshop. They also relied on memory, and reconstructed the conversations, working with other workshop staff to recall the adolescents’ words accurately. At the conclusion of each workshop, the workshop team collated all their notes, reflected on the discussions, stories, metaphors, and drawings and added further detail where possible, translated these into English, and compiled them into a single text-based document for thematic analysis. Image files and sound files were uploaded to a shared drive and accessed by the principal investigator. Ameen (workshop facilitator) and Gillian (principal investigator) also undertook a daily debrief lasting 60–120 minutes. The notes from the workshops and debriefs, along with the song audio and drawings, formed the dataset.

## 2.5. Research participants

Save the Children Country Office staff recruited the adolescent boys and girls for the study. The criteria for inclusion were that they should be in the target age range of 14 to 19 years of age, and currently taking part in Save the Children or partner programs. The goal was to form four groups of 10–12 participants in each of the three countries (Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey), with the participant groups delineated by age (grouping the 14–15-year-olds together, and the 16–19-year-olds together) and gender (having single-sex groups). There were some deviations from these, outlined in Section 2.8, ‘Limitations of the study’, based on the availability of adolescents.

The total participant sample was 110 adolescents, aged 14–19 years of age.<sup>12</sup> Workshop groups were single-sex. There were 63 Syrians, 27 Jordanians, 17 Palestinians (13 Palestinians were living as refugees in Lebanon, [PRL], the remainder were Palestinians living in Jordan), and 3 of Egyptian ancestry, born in Jordan. The breakdown per country was as follows:

- In Lebanon there were 31 participants across the four workshop groups, with 19 girls and 12 boys taking part. 18 participants were of Syrian refugee background and 13 were of Palestinian (PRL) background.
- The Jordan workshops involved adolescents aged between 14 and 17 years of age, and separate workshops were held for girls and boys. Across the workshop sites in the Za’atari camp and East Amman, there were 64 participants. Thirty-five participants were girls; 29 were boys. Thirty were Syrian, four were Palestinian, three were of Egyptian ancestry (born in Jordan), and twenty-seven were Jordanian.
- In Turkey, there were 15 participants, with 7 girls and 8 boys taking part. All were of Syrian refugee background.

See Figures 3 and 4.

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<sup>12</sup> Further breakdown of the participant ages was not possible, owing to inconsistent reporting of age data across the different workshop sites. See Section 2.8, Limitations.

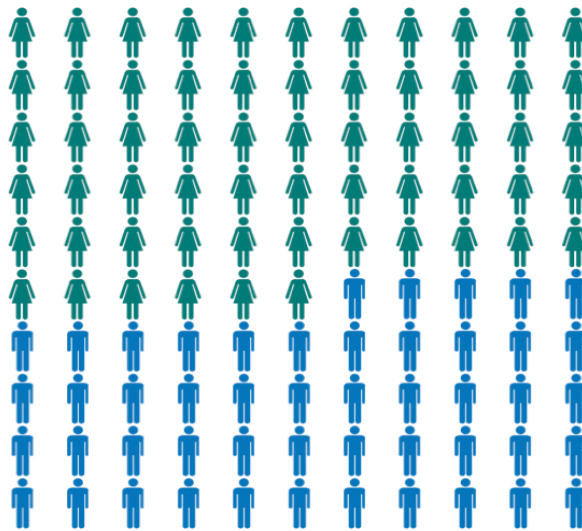


Figure 3: Female (green, n=61) and male (blue, n=49) participants (n=110)

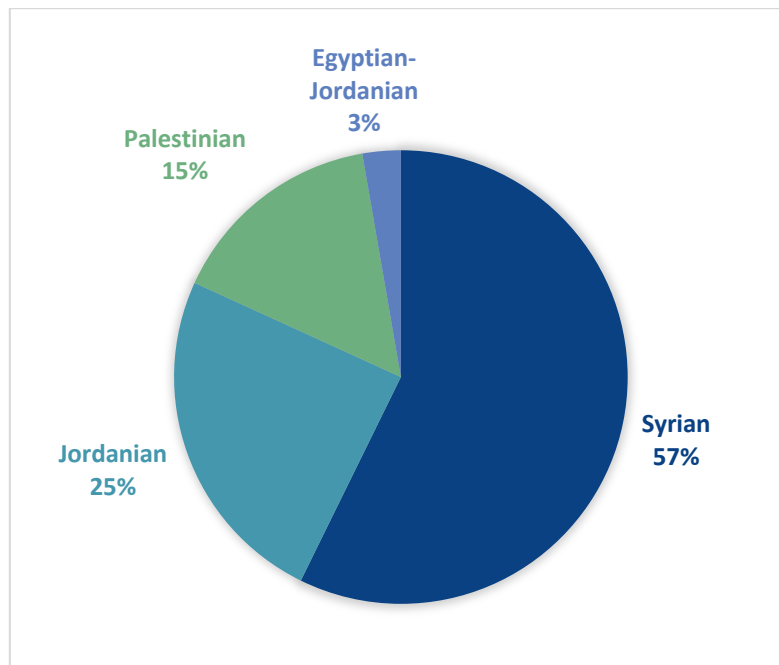


Figure 4: Breakdown of participant nationalities (n=110)

## 2.6. Ethics and consent processes

The University of Melbourne’s Human Research Ethics Review Board required a full (non-expedited) review of the ethics application and granted it full approval in November 2021.

Informed consent was sought and confirmed iteratively. Prospective participants were given a verbal explanation of the research project by Save the Children Country Office staff, accompanied by a printed information sheet and University of Melbourne consent form in Arabic. These information processes explained the research project, guaranteed anonymity, and outlined their right to withdraw from the project at any time. Parents/caregivers of participants aged under 18 years signed this to give consent for their child to participate. Participants aged 18 years and over were the primary consenting agents.

In addition, at the end of each workshop, when a song had been created by the group, a further participant consent process confirmed the participants' ownership of the finished song and asked for their permission for it to be shared with the other research participants, and with audiences specific to Save the Children and the research team. For this consent process, the workshop participants were deemed the primary consenting agents regardless of their age. This

reflected their ownership over the song as its creators, the de-identified content of the song, the expectation that the participants were of sufficient maturity to understand the implications of sharing the song and their comfort levels with this, and the fact the song presented the research findings in a medium that would appeal to other adolescent participants in the project. This decision was in line with the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (paragraphs 4.2.8 and 4.2.9).<sup>13</sup> Following discussion of these options, each participant group agreed to the proposed forms of sharing.

## 2.7. The songwriting methodology

The songwriting workshops were presented in Arabic. They began with group ice-breaker activities and tasks to ignite creative responses and reduce shyness. Following these, the workshop facilitator Ameen introduced the socio-ecological model for 'voice' in adolescent lives and invited the participants to reflect on the ways their voice changed in the different spaces they inhabit in their lives.

The participants considered their experience of (having a) voice across the five dimensions or 'spaces' represented in the model: within the family; among peers and friendship groups; online; in school or the workplace; and in a wider socio-political or tribal/community context. They discussed the spaces in which their voices felt strongest ('strong voice'), and the spaces where their voices felt most quiet ('low or weak voice'), or where they felt voiceless, and shared stories about these experiences. Starting with the spaces of 'strong voices' enabled the adolescents to start with positive experiences, and move gradually and safely towards more contentious statements. Some groups also considered a sixth dimension, that of the *internal* voice.

Note, the participants were not asked to rate or rank their 'voice' experience in all five spaces. Rather, they nominated those spaces in which their voices felt particularly strong or weak, or where they had a particular experience that they wished to recount. The *non*-nomination of a site by any participants as one where they experienced (for example) a strong voice does not necessarily mean that it was a site where their voice felt correspondingly weak or quiet. Rather, we can infer that it was a site where their voice did not have a significant quality that inspired further discussion.

As they discussed their experiences and shared stories or examples, the adolescents chose a descriptive or metaphoric label that captured their experiences of 'voice' in that space. These were written down on separate pieces of coloured paper (e.g. Figure 5). At the end of the discussions about the 'spaces' for their voices and the quality of their voice, the group re-examined all of the words and labels they had chosen. They debated together what 'theme' or narrative arc could include all of these words. These metaphors and other descriptive labels formed the basis of a song or poem that the workshop group composed together. The workshop facilitator, Ameen, helped them decide on a melody and rhythm (some groups created a rap or spoken word poem); they rehearsed it together, then recorded it (e.g. Figure 6).



Figure 5: Descriptive and metaphoric labels chosen at a workshop in Jordan

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018>

In creative workshops there is always the risk that participants might seek to offer ‘correct’ answers by taking their cues from the facilitator’s lead. Strategies for ensuring the workshop facilitator did not influence the choice of theme, metaphors, or narrative arcs included the facilitator offering the same examples in each workshop. For example, in order to illustrate how a metaphoric label might be applied, he gave the example of seeing his own life represented as a bird, and explaining why. The fact that the groups went on to choose a diversity of metaphors despite being given the same illustrative example shows that they used that example as information, rather than instruction or direction.

The songwriting workshops in Lebanon and Turkey also included a short drawing activity<sup>14</sup> in which the participants represented an aspect of their voice as a drawing. This gave them some processing time after the development of the song, and functioned as a further analytical ‘capture’ of the main concerns for each of them.



**Figure 6: Girls aged 14–17 years in Za'atari Camp record their song**

## **2.8. Limitations of the study**

The research workshops took place in a context of rapidly increasing cases of COVID-19 infections in each of the three countries. Save the Children’s Country Office staff in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey worked hard to ensure that the workshops could take place as planned, but the pandemic and the availability of adolescents necessitated some changes to the original workshop plan in some settings.

One limitation concerned age-related data. Originally, it had been intended to hold separate workshops for 14–15-year-olds and 16–19-year-olds, given that adolescent experiences can vary considerably between the younger and older years in the age range. However, only the Lebanon Country Office was able to organise the workshop groups in this way. In Jordan, the adolescent programs cater for those up to the age of 17; therefore, the Jordan workshops included participants aged 14–17 years. One of the note-takers provided age data for one of the boys’ groups; for the

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<sup>14</sup> The workshops in Jordan did not include the drawing activity due to the shorter timeframes allowed for the workshops. See section 2.7.

other groups, age data was incomplete or not available. In Turkey, similarly, the adolescent program was targeted towards Syrian refugees and had an upper age limit of 18 years. As there were only two workshops in Turkey it was not possible to create groups delineated for both gender and age range. Therefore, the workshops in Turkey included participants aged 14–18 years.

Where the exact age of the speaker is known in the quoted data, it is provided in this report, and has been used to inform an age-specific analysis wherever possible. Otherwise, the age range of the workshop group is provided.

While six workshops were held in Jordan, a misunderstanding resulted in the first workshop in Za'atari involving only boys aged 11–13 years old. The data from that workshop have not been included as that age group was outside the desired range and ethics approval. Similarly, in two other Za'atari workshops, a 13-year-old registered (one in each group). These participants were encouraged to participate fully in the workshop, but their comments have not been included in the data because they were outside the desired age range for which ethics approval had been received. In one workshop in Lebanon, one of the girls in the 16–19-years workshop was 20 years old. In this case, her comments were included in the data as she was able to give informed consent for her participation, and her comments were relevant to the situation for older adolescent girls. Her age is noted in the results shared in the next section.

In Jordan, the workshops needed to be shortened to just three hours, due to the rapid increase of COVID19 cases and the Government of Jordan's decision to bring forward the dates of end-of-term exams. This did not allow sufficient time to include the drawing activity. Also, in each of the Jordan locations (Za'atari camp and East Amman), it was not always possible for the adolescents to remain for the full workshop, due to family obligations and school exams. The gradual attrition of participants meant that, on several occasions, only a small number of the original participants were involved in composing and recording the song. Many of those being called away were reluctant to leave. Some were able to persuade their parents/caregivers to let them stay until the end, but, as one note-taker observed, "their faces were stressed ... as a result of the repeated calls" (notes from East Amman workshop, 9 December).

While we endeavoured to include a wide diversity of life experiences in the workshop groups, there were some omissions. Only one participant had a visible disability. Others may have identified as having a hidden disability, or identified as neurodiverse; similarly, the groups may have included individuals with diverse sexual orientations or gender fluidity. However, as these were not a focus in the workshop content nor recruitment strategy, there are no data to confirm the diversity of the cohort across identities that may carry additional stigma and social marginalisation.

Lastly, while the recruitment strategy did not nominate adolescents of refugee background as the primary target, this cohort is targeted in much of Save the Children's work in the region. With prior participation in Save the Children programs a sampling criterion, this resulted in high representation of refugee adolescents in the research. In addition, past experience had shown that integrating young people from the host community and refugee communities in a shared workshop can take considerable time. The research team and SCI research manager therefore recommended to Country Offices that they avoid mixing these two cohorts in the one workshop. This guidance, along with the sampling criteria, led to the predominance of adolescent refugees in the workshops.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Summary of sites associated with strong voices

In Lebanon the participant cohort included **Syrian refugees and Palestinians (PRL)**. Overall, the main places where adolescents experience strong voice were in the family (42%), among friendship groups (19%), and online (16%). Note, however, that older girls experienced their strongest voices in online spaces (33%), with a corresponding reduction in the vocal strength they found in the family or friendship groups (11%) (Figure 7).

	Girls 14–15 (n=10)	Boys 14–15 (n=7)	Girls 16–19 (n=9)	Boys 16–19 (n=5)
Family	6	3	1	4
Friends and peers	2	2	1	1
Online	0	0	3	2
School, workplace	0	0	0	0
Community, society, tribe	0	0	2	0

Figure 7: Summary of sites for strong voices in Lebanon

In Jordan, where the participants were **Syrian refugees and Jordanians** aged 14–17 years, the main places where adolescents experienced strong voice were in the family (44%) and among friendship groups (22%). The boys in Za’atari included sports teams in the dimension of ‘school and workplace’; 53% of them described having a strong voice in school, workplace, or sports teams (Figure 8).

	Girls 14–17, Za’atari (n=12)	Boys 15–17, Za’atari (n=17)	Girls 14–16, E. Amman (n= 23) <sup>15</sup>	Boys 14–17, E. Amman (n= 12)
Family	7	3	7 (2+5)	11
Friends and peers	5	3	6 (2+4)	0
Online	1	0	0	1
School, workplace, sports teams	0	9	0	0
Community, society, tribe	0	0	0,	0

Figure 8: Summary of sites for strong voice sites in Jordan

For **Syrian refugees in Turkey**, adolescents only experienced strong voices in the family setting (47%). While there were some stories shared of strong voices elsewhere in the socio-ecological model, overall, the data indicated that neither boys nor girls felt their voices were particularly strong in any available space (Figure 9).

	Girls, Turkey, 14–17 years (n=7)	Boys, Turkey, 14–18 years (n=8)
Family	4	3
Friends and peers	0	3
Online	2	0
School, workplace	0	1
Community, society, tribe	0	0

Figure 9: Summary of strong voice sites in Turkey

<sup>15</sup> There were 11 girls in the first group, 12 in the second group. The table shows the disaggregation of two girls’ groups.

### 3.2. Summary of sites of weak or silent voices

In Lebanon, the experiences among the adolescents of having a low, weak, quiet, or ineffectual voice were more numerous than those of their 'strong voice' experiences. Family (32%), school or workplace (29%), and the wider community (45%) were identified as sites where adolescents found their voices to be particularly unheard (Figure 10).

	Girls 14–15 (n=10)	Boys 14–15 (n=7)	Girls 16–19 (n=9)	Boys 16–19 (n=5)
Family	4	3	2	1
Friends and peers	1	0	0	0
Online	1	0	2	0
School, workplace	2	3	4	0
Community, society, tribe	10	2	1	1

Figure 10: Summary of sites for quiet or unheard voices in Lebanon

In Jordan, the dominant spaces for weak or silent voices were wider society (30%), the family (27%), and schools and workplaces (22%) (Figure 11).

	Girls 14–17, Za'atari (n=12)	Boys 15–17, Za'atari (n=17)	Girls 14–16, E. Amman (n=23)	Boys 14–17, E. Amman (n=12)
Family	1	5	11 (5+6)	0
Friends and peers	0	0	1 (0+1)	2
Online	1	1	1 (1+0)	1
School, workplace, sports teams	1	6	1 (0+1)	6
Community, society, tribe	9	1	8 (6+2)	1

Figure 11: Summary of sites for quiet or unheard voices in Jordan

For Syrian refugees in Turkey, the dominant space where adolescents felt voiceless or weak-voiced was school and the workplace (Figure 12).

	Girls, Turkey, 14–17 years (n=12)	Boys, Turkey, 14–18 years (n=8)
Family	2	3
Friends and peers	1	0
Online	1	0
School, workplace	3	5
Community, society, tribe	0	0

Figure 12: Summary of sites for Syrian refugees' quiet or unheard voices in Turkey

Their accounts paint a picture of navigating their way to adulthood in a very hierarchical social environment, where few are held to account for unjust or wrong behaviour, and where there is a sense of lawlessness or impunity. Many of them perceived dangers associated with using their voices, and this compelled them to stay quiet, or to choose the occasions for speaking up or talking back with considerable care.

### 3.3. Adolescent experiences of voice across the socio-ecological dimensions

#### 3.3.1. In the family

Adolescent experiences of voice in family environments are equivocal at best. While the family space was the site where 49 out of 110 participants experienced a strong voice (45%), it was also the site where just under a third of the participants felt they had a weak or unheard voice (32 out of 110 participants, or 29%). Through the discussions in each workshop, a picture emerged of family environments as extremely hierarchical, where having a low, weak or unheard voice corresponded with a low position in the family hierarchy, but also susceptible to wider social norms that can inhibit adolescent voices.

For those that nominated it as a 'strong voice' site, parents were an important source of advice and guidance. Two boys from Za'atari said that, while they might talk to their friends about problems or issues, their families offered the best support and advice (boys, Za'atari, both 15 years). Girls in Za'atari (where 58% of girls nominated the family as a site of strong voice) felt their strength of voice was depicted through things like having a close relationship with one or both parents, being included in important conversations, and feeling like they were treated the same as their brothers. Girls in East Amman (7 out of 23 girls, 30%) felt they were listened to in their families. One girl in East Amman believed her strength of voice was a result of her personal traits:

*I am strong and I have self-confidence. I don't feel shy to talk and I am wise. I feel like the moon, surrounded by the clouds and I try to move these clouds to reach to my father and mother. I like to ask their opinion and follow it. (Girl, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 2)*

A girl in East Amman (group 1) gave a nuanced account of her experience of voice within her family. While she found that her family members often didn't agree with her, they nevertheless supported her to have her own voice:

*I don't like to open my heart to people. Sometimes I take some opinions around me in the family, but it depends on the issue I have. I am closer to myself. My family accepts my ideas even when they don't like these ideas, they discuss it, but in the end they stand by me, they encourage me because they see that I am different and because I have achievements in my life. (Girl, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 1)*

For some adolescents, their vocal space within the family was somewhat contingent on their parents' satisfaction with their behaviour, in particular that they should **conform to behavioural expectations** of a 'good son/daughter'. For example, two girls in East Amman felt that to some degree, their parents' support was connected to their marks in school. Low marks could result in a loss of 'privileges' such as "no phones, no internet, no TV" (girl, 16 years, East Amman). Boys in Turkey (14–18 years) also understood that the vocal spaces they enjoyed in their families was because their parents considered them "good sons" who were obedient and reliable. One boy in Lebanon said, "I feel responsible towards my family. They have started to depend on me. [Why?] They see I can take responsibility" (boy, 16–19 years, Lebanon). Another described the "freedom of choice" and "privacy" he had in his family, believing this was because he "does the right things," adding that his parents treated all of them equally (boy, Lebanon, 16–19 years). Both these boys chose the metaphor of a House Pillar to describe their role in the family and the role given to their voice.

Beyond individual behaviour, having a strong voice relied on several influential factors and wider social norms.

First, position in the sibling birth order was a significant factor. Adolescents suggested that being the oldest or the youngest could help to increase the strength of an adolescent's voice. Youngest children were sometimes spoiled and given extra attention within their families. Oldest children were often given additional responsibilities and could be rewarded with greater independence and authority within the family, including with their parents.

*I am the older one and they depend on me. My dad asked me to take care about my brothers like a father, and even my friends come to me with their problems like I am*

*their father, even though we are the same age. Sometimes I stand against some ideas from my dad, not to create a conflict or to say who is wrong and who is right but because their generation is different than our generation. For example, I do rap, and my dad is always asking me to stop doing rap and focus on school only. I always say to him "Well, sorry! But when I will follow my plan, I will be much better than my teachers who taught me things." (Boy, 14–17 years, East Amman)*

In Lebanon, a middle child (14–15 years) felt he was overlooked in favour of his younger and older siblings; a youngest child felt that he was not given the autonomy he desired because of his age:

*I want to go out in the streets, but my parents don't let me. [Why?] Because I am their youngest one. In fact, I do have a voice, but nobody listens to me. (Boy, 14–15 years, Lebanon)*

Asked what resembled his voice, he said, "a pigeon," an animal that can make a lot of noise, but is considered an annoying pest by most people. The middle child selected 'a mouse', a metaphor that seemed indicative of his quiet or unheard voice in his family.

However, the research findings also suggested that strength of voice associated with family position was **gendered, and skewed in favour of boys**. In Lebanon, where the workshop groups were divided by age range (14–15 years and 16–19 years) as well as gender, **older girls** aged 16–19 years revealed that, regardless of their position in the birth order, their voices became more constrained as they got older. Their younger siblings, particularly brothers, often had far less regulated lives and vocal space than they, as older girls, had. The same kinds of restrictions were reported by 16-year-old girls in the Za'atari camp, where one explained, "Because I am the older [sibling], I have to obey the requirements and instructions of the younger ones" (girl, 16 years, Za'atari). And while all of the boys in this research felt their parents treated boys and girls equally in the family, many of the girls felt they faced considerably more restrictions.

One girl in the Za'atari girls' workshop was the oldest in her family. She was much older than her siblings, and her parents expected her to take on many responsibilities in the home in a quasi-parenting role. She was close to tears as she explained, "They don't listen to me because I am the older one. They ask me to obey my younger siblings<sup>16</sup> and that is not fair. I want to live my life and not only serve them" (girl, 14–17 years, Za'atari). In Lebanon too, the older girls (16–19 years) experienced their family members "looking down on them" and seeing them as lesser. Girls described their brothers as having far greater freedom and authority in the family and home environment than they (the girls) had.

*I have four younger brothers. They have more privilege than I do; they can do whatever they want. I can't force anything over my brothers. (Girl, Lebanon, 16–19 years)*

While the girls recognised the theory behind the normalisation of this hierarchy ("they say brothers are a support"), they were frustrated by their resulting lack of agency and the way that this denied them the opportunity to forge an independent path in the world:

*If I'm strong I don't need support. A brother might hurt his sister when being overprotective. I need to experience mistakes in order to learn. (Girl, Lebanon, 16–19 years)*

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<sup>16</sup> It was not clear if the younger siblings were brothers or sisters.

Therefore, while things improved for boys as they got older, the opposite seemed true for the older girls. Together, the 16–19-year-old girls in Lebanon named the drivers of this situation as “**deeply rooted mentalities,**” producing self-perpetuating norms which many of their elders failed to question and could not satisfactorily justify. The girls challenged the suggestion that these norms were grounded in religion, arguing that in fact they came from cultural traditions. They wanted to be able to claim the equal rights that they knew they were entitled to, and to experience all that life had to offer them, just as their brothers could.

*They [the parents] say that the community is dirty [i.e., morally corrupting, unsafe] and as a girl you cannot protect yourself from that. But at the same time, they empower their boys to be dominating the community and destroying the community. Then they try to protect us from something they created, which is their boys! (Girl, 16–19 years, Lebanon)*

*I want to stay outside home beyond 5pm. I want to ride a motorbike, but it’s considered inappropriate for girls. When I ride a motorbike with my brother driving, I have to sit cross-ways, with my legs together [a more dangerous, less stable position] because that’s the way that girls have to sit. (Girl, 20 years, Lebanon).*

The 14–15-year-old girls in Lebanon described their voices and their lives being tightly regulated by their parents’ strict rules about where they could go, the things they could do, and what they should be interested in. Some recognised that these rules came from a place of love—“they want the best for me because I am their child” (girl, 14–15)—but also from limiting beliefs associated with gender norms and a lack of faith in their daughters’ ability to make sound judgements for themselves. As one girl said, “I also know what’s best for me, but they don’t let me do it” (girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon).

*They compare me with the neighbour’s daughter, pointing out that she is working, and I am always on the phone. And my mother always says to me that when she was my age “I used to wake up at 4am and work!” [she laughs]. They think the girl should work at home only. (Girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon)*

Girls (14–17 years) in East Amman spoke candidly about the way their families blamed them for the **bad behaviour of men**. They used euphemisms like “when something happens in the street” to talk about sexual harassment, with one girl explaining that she no longer told her family when these (unfortunately repeated) experiences happened, because in the past they had told her it was her own fault and used it as a reason to further restrict her movement.

*Once something happened with me in the street and I told my family, and they blamed me and asked me not to go out any longer, even though I was the victim ... So I don’t tell my family about these things at all. (Girl, 14–16 years, East Amman, group 2)*

This girl used the metaphor of a rabbit to describe her voice, explaining that when a rabbit senses danger, it screams in a loud and distinctive way. The workshop facilitator Ameen had the impression that this was a strategy she had used to protect herself in the street in the past.

Parental fear of girls’ vulnerability around boys and men also meant that they strongly policed and regulated their daughters’ friendships with boys. This was a ‘hot topic’ among the 14–15-year-old girls in Lebanon at the time of their songwriting workshop. They agreed that if families saw their daughter with her boyfriend they would “make a big issue about it.” For this group of girls, this degree of parental control was stressful and “weird.”

Voice and voicelessness in the family were also affected by an adolescent’s **biological relationship** with their parent(s). This was discussed particularly among the girls in East Amman and Turkey. If a girl’s parent had passed away

and the other parent had remarried, the arrival of step-parents and step-siblings could position the girl in a very low position in the family hierarchy, rendering her voiceless.

*I am an orphan. My dad is dead, and I feel my voice is fading with my stepfather. My (half) sister is spoiled because she is his daughter. My sister is the real daughter, and I am not. (Girl, 14–16 years, East Amman, group 2)*

Family relationships could be also filled with tensions due to the fact that many people in the communities involved in this research are living in extremely **constrained and precarious financial circumstances**. One boy in Za’atari described the way that poverty in large families could create an environment where young people were obliged to provide for themselves.

*I have no voice at home. If I ask them for something they just say, "Go and work in order to get these things for yourself!" It's really hard to find a job here even for [my parents] and we are in a bad financial situation. (Boy, 15–17 years, Za’atari)*

Some adolescents felt their voices were weak or inaudible in the family even though they had a close relationship with one or more parent. Parents were rendered absent when “they are busy with their phones or work, and they are not available” (girl, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 1).

*I miss my dad a lot. I can’t talk with anyone else apart from him. But I also feel shy to talk with him. I can only call him if it’s an emergency. [Her friend interjected: You are like a slanting wall, a wall that’s so crooked, it’s about to fall over’]. Yeah, maybe. (Two girls, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 1)*

For others, fathers were an intimidating or silencing presence. One boy said, “I have a voice at home but only until my dad comes. I cannot say anything when he is there, I simply cannot.” Nevertheless, he added, “It is for that reason that I respect my father” (boy, 15 years, Za’atari camp).

Similarly, for a significant portion of the 49 participants that considered their voices strong in the family space, their voices were only strong with particular members of the family, or their **vocal strength was conditional** upon another member of the family being absent. While 92% of the boys in East Amman felt they had a strong voice in the family, some felt they only had a strong voice with a particular sibling, or with their siblings in general but not with their parents, or with their mother, but not their father. Some in the group declared a strong voice, but also admitted they preferred to spend most of their time in their room, away from conversations with their family, and, therefore, did not often place their voice in the centre of the family environment. This conditionality meant that in some groups, participants nominated the family space as a site where their voice felt both strong *and* weak.

Furthermore, the space that parents allowed for adolescents’ voices could change without warning. One boy described the following experience:

*I see myself in the family like someone who is doing ice sculpting, I talk and I convince them, and they follow my needs, but then everything stops, and I have to start again – so it’s like, after a while the ice start melting then all my work is gone and I have to start again. (Boy, 14–18 years, Turkey).*

**Sibling relationships** could also make adolescents feel voiceless. The boy who made the ‘ice sculpting’ comment above went on to describe a family environment where his older brother often undermined him and his ideas. This was a subversive tactic; the older brother would work in the background to undermine the ‘case’ that the younger brother was making to his parents. He described his voice as a “microphone without a speaker,” suggesting that the cable that would normally connect a microphone to a speaker or amplifier had been cut by his brother.

Other silencing tactics used by siblings came in the form of a refusal to engage:

*My sister doesn't look at me while I am talking to her ... sometimes I get angry, and I move her face towards my face. [One time] I took her phone and smashed it on the floor. I want people to look at my face when I'm talking! (Girl, 14–16 years, East Amman, group 2)*

This kind of anger and despair can also be turned inwards, through acts such as cutting, the scars of which were seen on the arms of one girl in East Amman.

**Trust was an issue;** several girls and boys across the different groups mentioned betrayals where something told in confidence was later shared more widely by the entrusted person.

*All of [my family] wants me to talk and open my heart but I don't. ... I can't! They don't keep my secrets at all. Once I told my brother about something and after a minute he was telling my secret to his friend. So I don't want to tell them anything, because I don't trust them. (Girl, 14–16 years, East Amman, group 2)*

'Thinking differently' was also a problematic factor in the adolescents' lack of vocal space. This phrase functioned as a coded way of indicating ideological impasses, different generational values, or their parents' desire to retain values from their (more conservative or traditional) lives in Syria rather than adapting to the values and norms for young people in the host country.

*My parents think differently. For example, I have a Facebook account but they don't know about it. They would not let me do this, because they see it as a wrong thing, even though I know how to use it and I don't do the wrong things. (Girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon)*

In Turkey, two boys stated that their families did not really accept them as they were. For one boy, this manifested in their dislike of his passion for art and for drawing Anime figures (cartoon-like figures popularised through Japanese graphic culture). They wanted him to draw nature scenes, concerned that drawing animate objects was against the rules of Islam (boy, 14–18 years, Turkey). Similarly, a girl from the Turkish group felt that she had reached an impasse with her parents, due to their inability to accept her interests and cultural life.

*My parents don't want to listen to me. I've tried many times to start conversations with them. They are supportive to me but they don't like my choice of music, and they don't like that I talk to my friend in Yemen on social media. At least now, they don't comment on it so much. (Girl, 14 years, Turkey)*

Related to the question of being true to oneself, some adolescents attached their experience of voice to the extent to which their dreams and aspirations were supported by their families. One girl described the way her dreams of studying medicine in Jordan had fallen by the wayside when her family members did not support her wish to specialise in the prerequisite science subjects at school (girl, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 1).

Another girl in Jordan felt not only were her dreams dismissed by her family, she was also used by them:

*My family doesn't listen to me because they don't agree with my dreams. I wanted to be a chef and start attending cooking workshops, but they don't want me to do so,*

*they want me to cook at home only. I feel like I am a fridge, they just take what they want. (Girl, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 1)*

One of the ideas most strenuously expressed across the groups was the desire to be listened to in their families. The adolescents recognised that it was one thing to be able to use one's voice; having others be willing to listen to it was another challenge entirely. One girl in the second East Amman group (14–16 years) spoke only once, waiting until the end of the session to contribute. Her sense of voicelessness was palpable, and her voice became more vehement as she spoke her truth. The starkness and simplicity of her request—"Just listen to me!"—reverberated throughout the remainder of the workshop, functioning as a touchstone for the development of the lyrics.

*Nobody listens to me. My whole family doesn't listen to me, ever since my dad passed away. He used to listen to my problems. I listen to my family but they don't listen to me, no friends, nobody ... I only want someone to listen. Just listen to me! (Girl, 14–16 years, East Amman group 2)*

Across all the workshop groups, the adolescents' frustrations were underscored by the metaphors they chose for their voices in the family environment. One described herself as "a turned-off TV," able to speak and have a voice, but only if someone else enabled it (girl, Lebanon, 16–19 years). And both a 16–19-year-old girl and 16–19-year-old boy described themselves as a "silent individual," as if they had no voice at all (Lebanon). Some described or alluded to their voicelessness as being like "a chair leg" (girl, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 1), or a fridge (girl, East Amman, group 1).<sup>17</sup>

*I'm just an object in that house. I'm almost nothing. Nobody ever cares about the chair leg, or thinks about the chair leg. It's just a thing. (Girl, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 1)*

One girl described herself as "a pen," noting that it does lots of things, and if it stops working it can be fixed (or replaced). But, she added, "I give more than I take" (girl, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 1). These references to inanimate, utilitarian objects suggest that adolescents experience themselves as not only voiceless, but even dispensable or replaceable in some family settings. In these ways, intersecting configurations of family norms, financial stress, and wider sociocultural norms combine to create an extremely compromised and constrained space for adolescents' voices and agency.

### 3.3.2. In the friendship group

Only one in five of the total participant group (21%) considered their friendship group to be a space where their voices felt strong. It is perhaps surprising that this number is so low, as friendship groups in adolescence are usually important spaces for self-actualisation and development of identity. However, only 5% of participants nominated the friendship group as a site for weak or quiet voices (5 out of 110 participants). The most prevalent reason for feeling voiceless among friends was due to being the youngest in the group, reflecting the age hierarchies that characterise many Middle Eastern societies.

Those that felt they had a strong voice in the friendship space described friendships that were **egalitarian and grounded in shared interests and points of view**. One girl in Lebanon (14–15 years) said, "My friends listen to me all the time. We love each other, we trust each other, and we stand together." Another said that she has "a friend [who is] a boy. He listens carefully to me, gives me advice and awareness. With this friend I feel my voice is heard. We share the same ideas" (girls, Lebanon, 14–15 years). For the boys in Turkey, a strong voice in the friendship group was associated with having friends who were similar in their interests and thinking, and, therefore, understood each other

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<sup>17</sup> Describing oneself as a household tool or appliance was also a feature of adolescents' self-descriptions in earlier SCI research in the Middle East and North Africa – see p. 25 of the SCI report *'I wish tomorrow will not come'* (2019).

well. Metaphors chosen included ‘the heard person’ and the mobile phone (the latter because it is such a central and important part of an adolescent’s self-expression and engagement with others).

One older boy (16–19 years, Lebanon,) nominated his friendship group, formed through schooling together, as the space where his voice was particularly strong. He described them as “like wolves, strong and bonded.” He described it as an egalitarian group, without an evident leader.

*We are the same. We all share our opinions. Nobody bosses anyone around. (Boy, 16–19 years, Lebanon).*

In contrast, for two of the East Amman boys, friendship groups were sites where they felt ignored, or were bossed around. Being the youngest in the group was a disempowering factor, as was what one boy called having “a different life class” or social status (boy, 14–17 years, East Amman). The same boy went on to say,

*I need to set boundaries between them and me. Just because I’m the youngest one doesn’t mean that they are smarter than me. I have a voice! (Boy, 14–17 years, East Amman)*

Being the youngest in one’s friendship group was sometimes a result of the **friendships based on circumstances, rather than personal agency and choice**. For example, one girl in Lebanon (14–15 years) described a friendship group in which she frequently felt ignored. Why stay friends with these people, the workshop facilitator gently asked. She explained that they were her neighbours and she was the youngest. Her feeling of voicelessness was considerable: when asked to suggest a word or metaphor for her voice in this space, she said, “a burden” (girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon). This example shows the way that access to meaningful friendships intersects with the amount of freedom an adolescent given within the family. If a girl is not permitted to travel far beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood, and is not involved in formal education or any community groups, then her friendship opportunities will be dramatically limited. Correspondingly, this shows the significance of attending school or social environments (like adolescent-friendly spaces and non-school activity programs), as these are spaces in which she might have more chance to cultivate meaningful and trusted friendships with like-minded peers.

One girl in the Turkish workshop group seemed particularly socially isolated. She anticipated her friends’ rejection, saying,

*They don’t listen to me, in fact I don’t talk to them. I don’t think they will understand me. Or even accept me. I have no friends. (Girl, 17 years, Turkey).*

While little more was learned about this particular girl’s situation, it was clear that she attributed her isolation to an inability to speak and be heard, or to influence events in her peer group. Perhaps, like the above example of the 14–15-year-old girl in Lebanon, these non-friends are merely those she knows who are a similar age to her, and not really friends at all. The agency with which a person can choose their own friends should be understood as an important expression of voice.

Three of the Za’atari boys felt they had a strong voice in their friendship groups. One recognised himself as a *de facto* leader (a role he shared with another boy), and added the observation that he “became the leader because of my kindness, because **without kindness, nobody will follow you**” (boy, 14–17 years, Za’atari). However, this perspective was something of an anomaly in the Za’atari boys’ group. For them, strong voices across the socio-ecological model were associated with having **superior skills or competency** compared with others in the group. This afforded greater social status, adding authority to your voice and compelling others to listen. Their observations will be discussed in Section 3.3.4, the ‘schools, workplaces, and sports teams’ dimension.

Interestingly, most of those that considered the friendship group to be a space where their voices were strong, did not nominate the family environment as the same. This suggests that friends may be pivotal in creating spaces of belonging, voice, and agency when that doesn’t exist in the family.

*If I have any problems I talk to my friends and they advise me. I don't tell my family about my problems because my friends are listening to me. I feel I am like the peace dove, because I choose to make peace with everybody. (Girl, 14–17 years, Za'atari camp)*

Sometimes this was explained as having “nothing in common” with family members, whereas friendships developed as a result of common interests (girl, 14–16 years, East Amman, group 2). Another, related reason was that many felt their friends were more **accepting of their true, authentic selves** than their families were.

*My best friend listens to me and I talk to her about everything, in a way that I can't with my family. She is older than me. I like acting. I take classes, and I told my family after my school I will study art [acting] and I don't care about their opinion ... I am like a bullet in a gun, on fire to reach my goal when I talk with my best friend. I feel so powerful, I could just explode and go! (Girl, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 1)*

Another explained the way that she was free to adopt a completely different persona with her friends, one that felt truer to her spirit and personality:

*I am a lion with my friends. I like action and I like to be tough. I want to be a policewoman. I don't like the idea of being a butterfly [the metaphor her group chose for their song]—I don't want to be the weak one. My family wants me to be a nice, quiet girl, doing housework and homework, being good. But I like action. (Girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon)*

Similarly, a boy (14–15 years, Lebanon) found that his experience with his peers contrasted with that within his family: “Within my family, I'm not heard at all. With my friends, I'm heard a bit. Friends listen to me more than my family.”

The findings also suggested that friendship groups were still meaningful for those that didn't select it as a strong voice site. One girl (17 years old, Lebanon) suggested the friendship group was a space where she found agency and purpose. She used the metaphor of ‘a tree’ to explain the role of her voice: “I give ‘fruit’ to others in the form of advice, wisdom, and guidance.” For this girl, her voice might not have felt ‘strong’ in terms of leading the group, but she was nevertheless able to express herself in ways that she valued.

### 3.3.3. Online and social media

Overall, online spaces and social media were not considered sites for strong voices among the adolescents, with only 9 nine out of 110 participants nominating this space (8%). However, for those at the older end of the age range, it held importance as a site of increasing strength of voice. In Lebanon, just over a third (36%) of the 16–19-year-old participants selected it as a ‘strong voice’ site, whereas none of the 14–15-year-old participants did.

For some girls, social media was a space for **personal expression, and a freer, more creative experience of voice** than that offered in ‘real life’ environments. One girl described the way she liked to seek out quotations or write them herself and share these on social media. “I am using quotes from different writers which fit my feeling in that moment. I have friends who follow me but I don't really know if they are listening, reading or not. I like to talk to my sister about things, but if she is not available, I just post about the issue and that makes me feel better” (girl, 16–19 years, Lebanon).

Another described the way she used music to express herself and connect with people:

*I like to express myself, and people online hear me more than family or friends, especially that I am connected to more people on social media. I share music videos, which people enjoy. (Girl, 16–19 years, Lebanon)*

Social media could also expand their social circle, which in turn could expand the space for their voice. One girl in the girls' workshop group in Turkey described how she had met her closest friend online. The two had never met in person, as her friend lived in Yemen. Describing their friendship as "like soulmates and sisters," she used the metaphor of 'bird and fish' to depict the fact that despite being geographically distanced and from different communities, they could be connected by sea and air and were, therefore, close (girl, 14 years, Turkey).

Another girl (17 years old, Za'atari) had made new friends with like-minded others of different ages through being part of online activist groups, making new friends with whom she shared confidences and personal stories. The 16–19-year-old boys in the Lebanon workshop group agreed that the expansion of social worlds was an important benefit of online spaces, particularly when you have something important to say or wanted to influence others. "There are more people, so there is more potential to be heard," they said (boys, 16–19 years, Lebanon). They equated this reach with having a stronger voice.

The older boys also pointed out that the anonymity afforded by online spaces was a significant factor in enabling stronger voices, particularly when discussing politics.

*There's much more freedom. I can be anonymous and talk freely about anything. I won't fear anything or being caught. (Boy, 16–19 years, Lebanon)*

Their **concern for anonymity** is well-founded. Some of the older adolescent Syrian refugees recalled the fear of spies and informers that had permeated life in pre-war Syria. More recently, in Turkey, the recent 'banana' conflict between Turks and Syrians has underscored the dangers that can come from online activity that attracts negative government scrutiny. This sequence of events, that sprang from a series of satirical videos posted online by members of the Syrian community in Turkey that quickly went viral, has had real-world negative consequences for the Syrian community.<sup>18</sup> By the end of 2021, up to eleven Syrian refugees in Turkey were facing deportation after their videos of themselves eating bananas were deemed 'provocative' and insulting towards Turks. These events powerfully illustrate the constraints on Syrian and other refugee and migrant voices in online spaces, given rising anti-Syrian and anti-refugee sentiments and increasingly rigid homeland security-focused approaches in many host countries.

Anonymity could also enable the adoption of **a different persona online**, which in turn could facilitate stronger voice. Boys in both age groups in Lebanon talked about their experiences playing the online network game PubG<sup>19</sup> and the opportunities it gave them to craft a persona and a voice that was more authoritative and powerful than their 'real life' voice. One boy (Lebanon, 16–19 years), who had been a victim of bullying in real life, enthused about the way that "in PubG you can be the leader and your voice could be louder ... I can give the orders." In the virtual world of PubG, his intellect and skills at the game became the dominant attributes. His experience of a strong voice online was in part due to being able to craft a more satisfying persona for himself, where he got to choose the attributes that others could see/hear.

Some girls in Za'atari had been part of **structured online activism**. One discussed her prior involvement with NGO-led online activism and the use of hashtags as part of a collective action campaign against early marriage. This girl experienced social media and online spaces as sites in which she could work collectively and join others (locally and around the world) in calling out injustices and demanding change.

*I am active online. Once we did a campaign against underage marriage with a hash tag to stop this issue. I got involved because my older sister was married very young*

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<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59133076>

<sup>19</sup> PubG is a war game, very popular in the Middle East, that allows players to purchase weapons and interact with other players.

*and had a very bad time. At first, my dream was to be a journalist, but now I want to be a women's rights activist. (Girl, 17 years, Za'atari camp)*

For those trying to build an active social media presence, the number of followers and 'likes' they attracted was an important metric for the strength of their voice. One boy in East Amman considered his online voice to be strong because he was an active user of Instagram and had many followers.

*I have five thousand followers on Instagram, they love me and interact with me. My whole life is there, I post things all the time—photos with some songs and designs. I give lots of reactions with my followers and I reply to everyone. I don't look down on them like others do. (Boy, 14–17 years, East Amman)*

A girl in the workshop group in Turkey selected the online space as one where her voice felt strong because she had a popular TikTok account. She was optimistic about the potential of this space for her self-expression, explaining that she "posts the songs I like, and about my daily life. My goal is to reach 10 million followers" (girl, 16 years, Turkey).

An East Amman boy had been creating videos of his rap performances and was working to build a following on Instagram and TikTok. He admitted that he wanted more followers (he has 1000 TikTok followers and 80 Instagram followers; the 80 on Instagram are his friends), and for that reason felt that his voice was not strong online. But he was relaxed about this, recognising that he was building his audience slowly.

*I am making my history, even if I am slow like a turtle. (Boy, 14–17 years, East Amman)*

However, that degree of inner confidence and self-belief was not the norm among the adolescents trying to build an influential online presence.

Social media and online spaces in general became sites for weak voices if the adolescents felt unsatisfied with their number of 'likes', followers, and popularity. Developing an audience with which to share one's voice (i.e., opinions, ideas, forms of creative expression) took time and no doubt required a degree of media acumen as well as an enjoyment of what the platform has to offer. Not all adolescents found online spaces to be a beneficial or nourishing space for their voice.

One boy in Za'atari, for example, felt that his YouTube channel was a site where his voice was weak, despite it being his own initiative, and something into which he had invested considerable creative energy, creating videos of his 'freestyle football', which is a kind of choreography with a football.

*I make videos and share them on YouTube, but I don't have many views and I don't get followers. Maybe it's because my videos are low quality. I make them by phone. Maybe if I did them with better quality there would be better views. (Boy, 17 years, Za'atari)*

A girl in Lebanon (14–15 years), felt similarly. She felt that no-one really listened to her, and those that 'liked' her posts only did so because they knew her. At the same time, her online connections did not extend beyond people she already knew in person. Her comments suggest that for many younger adolescents, having a strong online voice is associated with gathering followers who are strangers, rather than people who know you. Having a 'strong voice' was associated with being a social media influencer.<sup>20</sup>

There were also some discussions about the harms that can be attributed to social media use. This includes the harms that might be caused by cyberbullying or other targeted online attacks, and certainly, these can effectively silence individual users. One girl in Turkey described an experience of this kind. She had posted some content on her TikTok

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<sup>20</sup> Having strangers among your followers is a measure of the authentic reach of one's voice, which in turn affords social respect and further online interest.

channel that her real-world friends disliked and they retaliated by running a campaign against her (also online, on TikTok). She reported that this reduced her followers and ensured she did not 'trend' that day (girl, 16 years, Turkey); however, the impact of this kind of targeted bullying or negative campaigning can have long-lasting, egregious effects.

Some of those that nominated online spaces as sites of voicelessness or quiet voices admitted that this was because they didn't use social media. One girl had concerns about the increasing influence of social media in adolescent lives and the problems it could cause (which she did not specify, but which could include excluding and bullying behaviours).

*I don't like social media. It makes problems. [Did you have a problem before?] No. But it happened with my friends, so I don't like it and I don't use it. (Girl, 14–17 years, Za'atari).*

A girl from East Amman (14–17 years, group 1) saw it as a waste of time, suggesting that the "one hour each day at least [that] all the girls here are using their phones [for social media]" could be much more productively used. She also saw it as dangerous, as it could expose young girls to "things that are unsuitable for your age, things you shouldn't see or know at this age." Another girl in the East Amman group retorted that she was not accounting for all the things that one could learn in social media, if "you use it in the right way" (girls, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 1). Meanwhile, for two girls in the 16–19-year-old girls' workshop in Lebanon, social media was a space where they experienced a weak voice, because they didn't see the appeal of using their voices on those platforms. One declared that she didn't like social media sites at all, preferring just to read things and scroll. The other questioned the value of expressing oneself so publicly.

*I don't think that everyone deserves to know your feelings. Maybe if I were to be an influencer, then I would be much more active. But I am more inclined to real life than virtual. (Girl, 16–19 years, Lebanon).*

There were indications that in some families, girls' access to and use of social media were scrutinised and regulated by other family members, such as parents or brothers. This is a likely factor in how strong an adolescent's voice may feel in that space. It may not be a space of voice and agency if one's usage is being scrutinised or controlled by adult or sibling gatekeepers.

Thus, the adolescents expressed an ambivalence about online spaces. They recognised that online spaces were, for many young people, public spaces where the control of older people or adult gatekeepers remained limited. Because of this, they were a promising platform for supporting the development of strong adolescent voices. However, there are some likely barriers to the accessibility and suitability of online spaces for adolescent voices, including access to technology, parental disapproval of time spent online, and the harms that can come through cyberbullying, harassment, and government or institutional scrutiny. The ability to craft a public persona, express oneself through music choices, imagery and text, and be part of collective actions arose as potential opportunities for engaging older adolescents in organised activities to facilitate their voices. However, the freedoms the online space affords are offset by the fact that everything shared carries a digital footprint or fingerprint, and this presents risks in contexts where online communications remain within the reach and interests of powerful authorities within the refugee and host communities.

### 3.3.4. In schools, workplaces or other large or structured social contexts

This dimension of voice is concerned with larger social contexts where adolescents have direct interactions, such as institutions like school, workplaces, or sports programs and teams. Among the eleven participant groups, only one group was wholly comprised of young people who were not in school or employment (East Amman girls, group 2). For that group, the community centre where they were meeting was their most significant and regular non-family social experience. Other participants considered a mix of schools, workplaces, and sports teams when reflecting on their experience of 'voice' and collective power in this space.

For all of those that did identify as having a strong voice in this dimension, a common factor was **being good at something**. As noted in Section 3.3.2, being recognised as possessing superior or valued skills or competencies in a social setting lends weight and authority to one's voice, creating both a greater share of the vocal space, and listeners. One boy in Turkey considered he had a strong voice in school. He suggested that his abilities as a comedian gave him a strong voice in school (boy, 14–18 years, Turkey). Other boys in the Za'atari camp workshop group talked about their experiences of voice as members of sporting teams and clubs. Football, gymnastics, and taekwondo were mentioned as spaces where their strong voices were facilitated by their sporting prowess.

*In the gymnastics field they listen to me. I spent years training in it and I was so good. But then they closed the centre, and I changed to train in Taekwondo ... I don't have the same voice at the Taekwondo society because there are many who are better than me, so people don't really ask me or listen to me. (Boy, 16 years, Za'atari)*

Importantly, these were also spaces where the boys were literally able to use their strongest voices: the football field is a site where they are free to shout and use their full vocal capacity. This literal interpretation of 'strong voice' also had a metaphoric subtext, as in many Middle Eastern cultures, young people are expected to ensure the volume of their voices remains lower than that of the more powerful people in their midst (such as community leaders, family elders, teachers, and other authority figures).

One boy in the Za'atari camp described his workplace as a place where his voice was strong, noting not only his capacities as a good worker, but as a respectful colleague, able to get along with others.

*I am doing well in my job [in an abattoir], so the other employees listen to me. [Why do they listen to you?] Because I respect them. (Boy, 15 years, Za'atari camp)*

In general though, these were social environments where adolescents found they had limited opportunities to speak and be heard. Nearly a third of the 110 participants (28%) nominated this dimension as a site for weak voices or voicelessness.

Three key factors emerged in the data to explain this lack of voice: (1) the heavy prevalence of violence and humiliation in their schools, (2) racism from peers and co-workers towards refugee communities, and (3) the degree to which a person's skill-set made them a valued member of the collective and thus afforded higher status and admiration. These are each considered in turn.

The subject of physical violence generated considerable discussion for boys in Jordan. While one boy said that in his school there was no violence perpetrated by teachers (boy, 16 years, Za'atari), this was countered by other boys' descriptions of beatings "with hose and electrical tape" (boy, 15 years, Za'atari), or with sticks (boy, 14–17 years, East Amman). One boy disclosed that he chose to leave school "because of the abuse" (boy, 15 years, Za'atari).

Violence was also prevalent among students in schools, and among adolescents outside school. One Za'tari boy described the way he tended to jump into fights with others, "to help [defend] my friends," which invariably saw him blamed for the fighting. Skilled in martial arts, he admitted that he had been taken to the police station for fighting a teacher, and had also needed to pay a fine for breaking a peer's nose. For this boy, violence functioned as a form of voice, a way to argue a position or to silence the voices (and violence) of others. Describing a similar situation, one of the 16–19 years boys in Lebanon said that he was:

*always blamed because I get into fights, but in fact, I'm trying to defend myself. I won't tell the supervisor if I am hit. I need to hit back and defend myself." (Boy, 16–19 years, Lebanon).*

For many adolescents, 'voice' equates with authority and the ability to assert dominance over others. Thus, fighting was for some a strategy for claiming greater vocal space for themselves, and using the same tactics as their oppressors: violence.

In Lebanon, boys in both age groups discussed the lack of accountability for injustices in schools, citing few if any effective avenues for reporting violence.

*At school, everyone is cranky. If we want to report someone, nothing will happen. No-one will do anything. [Is there a solution?] No. We probably need Spiderman or Superman. [What resembles your voice?] A lion. [But a lion is strong, right?] Then go for a Silent Lion. (Boy, 14–15 years, Lebanon)*

A lack of teacher accountability for violence or disrespectful treatment of students left the adolescents with limited ways to protect themselves. Most adopted patterns of avoidance, skipping school or classes on particular days in order to avoid being in the same room as teachers known for their use of violence. In this way, they protected their right to physical integrity but hindered their right to education—an unjust position to be placed in.

Boys in East Amman (all Jordanians) described being ignored or dismissed by their teachers. They felt that their teachers did not listen to them; if they tried to complain or seek a solution to a problem, they were likely to be sent away, asked to return at a later date, or dismissed in some way so that they would eventually tire of the process and give up. For example, one boy described approaching a teacher to re-sit an examination:

*He asked me to come later, so I did, then again he asked me the same, I did again; [and this happened] many times until I stopped asking him at all. They simply don't want to listen to us. (Boy, 14–17 years, East Amman)*

The metaphors the East Amman boys chose to depict their 'voice' experiences in school were stark. They chose household objects and furnishings that have utility, but that are taken for granted—a chair, a table, a shelf. One boy chose 'a window', saying, "each time I want to talk, they close me like a window." Another boy was angrier, seeing himself as "a needle. They use me in need only but if they misuse me, I will hurt them." 'Voice' for these young men was something they believed they had; the issue was getting people to listen to them and to value and respect them and their words.

*I only want them to listen to me first, let me finish my words, then he [the teacher] can do whatever he wants to do. I don't care. Just let me finish talking! (Boy, 14–17 years, East Amman)*

The fact that the same problems were reported by boys in both Jordan and Lebanon suggest the culture of dismissal, dominance, and violence within schools is not only a legacy of war and conflict, but is systemic. It correlates with highly hierarchical societies where violence is normalised and often goes unpunished, and where too many people feel powerless, from a very young age.

For girls in Lebanon aged 16–19 years, school was similarly a site where their voices felt constrained.

*I have no voice at school, I can't say my opinion there. They have only a small space in which we can speak. (Girl, 16–19 years)*

A girl from the East Amman girls' group at first suggested that having a quiet voice in school was appropriate, as "[she was] there to study!" But she then admitted that she had abandoned her education because of the way her voice – in the form of questions – had been dismissed and disrespected by her teachers.

*I used to try to talk. I asked them questions, but they would punish me by ordering me to stand nearby the door. Once I asked a question and the teacher said, "Your question is stupid, like a donkey, just like you!" I stopped going to school after that. This was my revenge on her. (Girl, 14–16 years, East Amman, group 2)*

Thus, as occurred with the boys, negative schooling experiences could have a significant and long-lasting impact on a young person's education.

Some of the older girls in the Lebanon workshop criticised the way that, rather than being a space of discovery and the creation of knowledge, talents, and capacities, school functioned as a place of conformity and limitation. One girl who loved to sing recalled being told by a teacher, "At school we only study, nothing else, not sing!" Because of this very teacher-centric approach to education, many students disengage. "I only follow what is there [at school]. I cannot say my opinion, even if I don't like things," said one girl (16–19 years, Lebanon). Another agreed: "I have no voice here because school is only for doing what they want us to do, and no more" (girl, 16–19 years, Lebanon).

One girl described an education curriculum that did little to enable the students to develop informed, critical voices that could engage with contemporary events. For her, this placed a major constraint on her voice, because it disallowed its very formation and development.

*It has been the same system even since my parents were at school, and the system is wrong. I want to be asked for my choice in that system, not only do whatever the teachers want. They teach us so many things in history that are irrelevant nowadays. For example, I suggested that they should speak about what happened in the port recently,<sup>21</sup> rather than speak about the history of what happened with the king of Sweden! People should know what happened! (Girl, 16–19 years, Lebanon)*

However, individual teachers can create a space for the students' voices, and this is recognised. "Once we had a teacher who used to listen to us. Only that teacher gave us the space to choose. We were more like friends than students and teacher" (girl, 16–19 years, Lebanon).

The girls in the 16–19 years group in Lebanon chose metaphors for their voice in school that depicted the energy behind their voice (e.g., "the sun, and the light and fire that comes from it"), the lack of weight for their voice ("air"), and the role of teachers in inhibiting students' voices ("amazing voice until the teacher comes").

The second major inhibitor of adolescent voices in schools and workplaces, particularly for adolescents from refugee backgrounds in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, was racism. This could be subtle or overt. Indeed, for some boys, it was difficult to name certain discriminatory behaviours as motivated by racism, even when to onlookers, the underlying motivation was clear. For example, the Syrian boys in the workshop in Turkey discussed their unsatisfactory peer relationships in school and the workplace. They believed they had a weak or silenced voice among these same-age peers from the host community because it was difficult to forge friendships with them. However, when asked *why* it was difficult, they suggested the unfriendliness was because they (the Syrian boys) were still quite new in the school.

*I think it is because they don't know me very well [yet], like my friends out of the school [know me]. I think we need more time until they start to feel normal and treat me well. (Boy, 14–18 years, Turkey)*

Workplace stories were similar: Syrian boys were ignored at work and not listened to, and again, they attributed this to being new to the workplace, or because they were the youngest. This reasoning framed these problems as temporary, implying that the problems would end once the period of newness ended, or a younger staff member joined the workplace, or workmates accepted them as valuable classmates and peers (boys, 14–18 years, Turkey). A young Syrian boy in Lebanon described similar experiences in his workplace:

*They don't listen to me. I am a new worker; I've only been there for 3 months. Maybe they would [listen to me] if I was the boss, or if I was more experienced. (Boy, 14–15 years, Lebanon).*

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<sup>21</sup> Referring to the deadly explosion in the Port of Beirut in 2020.

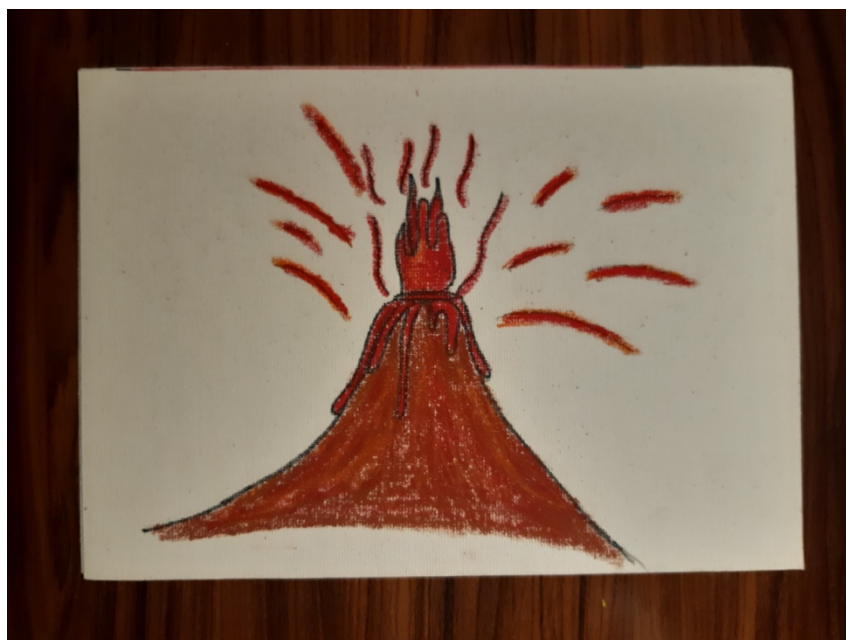
The girls, however, had a more critical perspective, one that also aligned with the experiences of the two Syrian workshop staff: they believed that these discriminatory behaviours were due to racism directed towards them on account of being Syrian.

*In the school, there is racism. Why? Because we came to their country, and they think we took their country ... We have to send them for two weeks to Syria so they can live the life there to understand us. (Girl, 14 years, Turkey)*

This girl proposed the metaphor of “a cat attacked by a lion” to indicate the ferocity of the racism she has witnessed (she was the cat and racism was the lion). And like the boys, girls often felt they had few viable responses beyond their own ferocity. One said,

*I don't stay quiet when they start attacking me. I talk back to them loudly. (Girl, 16 years, Turkey)*

Later, she drew a picture of a volcano spewing fire and rocks to illustrate the anger of some of her replies (Figure 13).



**Figure 13: “I don't stay quiet!” (Girl, 14 years, Turkey)**

A girl in Za'atari (17 years) described her voice as weak or quiet in school because of discrimination and racism from her (Jordanian) teachers.

*I have an 89% grade point average, but some of the teachers, who are Jordanian, look down on me. They say to us, "You are alive because of us" and they want us to be grateful. But no, they are racist. I don't like that [attitude] and I cannot say anything to them. [I want to ask them], "Isn't it enough for you that our country is devastated! You want also to destroy our ideas?" So I am using the apps and the internet which helps me to learn. (Girl, 17 years, Za'atari)*

The workshop staff reflected later on the Syrian boys' reluctance (or inability) to recognise and name their poor treatment as racist. We can speculate that it has to some degree been normalised, even internalised, by the young men, so that they no longer notice it; or they may recognise it, but feel hopeless and powerless in their capacity to address it, so they refuse to acknowledge it. The refusal to name racist behaviour can be a coping mechanism,

enabling one to carry on each day without conflict. If they had to recognise and name the problem, they would also have to address it in some way.

A third, less prominent factor contributing to weak or unheard voices in large group, institutional settings is that of lacking the competence and skills that make one a valued member of the collective and thus afford higher status and admiration. For the boys in Za'atari, several of whom were not in school, sports teams were a comparable social site to schools and workplaces. For many, sports teams were sites for strong voices (see the previous section). However, this was not the case for the weaker, less skilled players.

*In the football team, nobody listens. You must prove yourself on the field [in order to have a voice]. This is the only way. (Boy, 15 years, Za'atari)*

Sports could also be a site for some where the competitive goals and extrinsic motivations of others in the team clashed with their intrinsic motivation to have fun. This impacted their experience of having a voice and being valued for *whole* selves, rather than just for their capacity to help another player achieve *his* goals.

*When we are playing a match, my team-mate doesn't pass the ball to me. I am playing to have fun, not to score goals, but he only cares about the points. (Boy, 16 years, Za'atari)*

Together, violence, racism and other discriminatory behaviours, competitive imperatives, dismissal and authority-centred pedagogies combine to create a lived environment that struggles to value the contributions of each individual and ensure space within which they might flourish and realise their potential. The result is a generation of young people who feel stifled, silenced, and resentful.

### 3.3.5. In wider society

Overwhelmingly, the vast majority of adolescents did not feel there were any spaces in wider society where they experienced having a 'strong voice'. Discussions that related to quiet voices, or voicelessness, predominated.

A common factor among the very few experiences of strong voices that were shared was the need for individuals to follow their own initiative. Their voices were unlikely to be facilitated by external others; rather, they needed to claim some of the vocal space for themselves. In Lebanon, one girl had initiated (or taken an influential role in) an online leadership program for other young people.

*I know I can influence my community. I have five teams whom I train in leadership skills. I use social media to give my workshops but I would prefer to meet them face to face ... I would prefer not to use the online classes but I have no choice because my family doesn't allow me to go out of the house a lot. So, I have a strong voice in the community but not at home, I cannot do whatever I like to do there. (Girl, 16–19 years, Lebanon)*

The sense of agency and purpose that this experience gave her made her feel that her voice mattered and was being heard in society. However, this contrasted with the constrained space for her voice within her home environment.

Another example of having a strong voice in 'wider society' came from the Za'atari boys' group. While none of the Za'atari boys nominated the wider social context as one where their voices felt strong, more general discussions revealed that many of them considered their strong voices to be "on the boundaries" of the camp. Residents of the camp are not allowed to leave the camp without a permit, and there is unauthorised activity around the perimeter fences, particularly in relation to smuggling goods out of the camp for selling in local markets (the boys mentioned selling birds as an example of this).

Both these examples suggest that opportunities for adolescents to develop **stronger voices may need to start at the margins** of what is currently fully sanctioned by the wider community.

Meanwhile, in the participants' discussions of weak voices and voicelessness in wider society, three factors came to the fore: the normalisation of lawlessness and impunity in wider society; the lack of trust; and gender norms that silence girls and continually shrink the social and vocal space they can occupy.

Many saw the societies they lived in as volatile places. One boy (17 years, Za'atari) explained that he preferred to keep a low profile in the wider community "because they all make problems." These problems included a community culture of bullying and speaking badly about others behind their back, something that other boys in the group confirmed (boys, 14–17 years, Za'atari). In East Amman, there were similar concerns, that the wider community includes "bad people" and "trouble makers" (boys, 14–17 years, East Amman).

However, an even greater problem was the existence of social structures that privilege criminal elites and a **general sense of lawlessness** or impunity for wrongdoers. These effectively meant that anyone trying to speak up for what was right would not only struggle to be heard, but might also bring community anger upon themselves. For example, girls in the 14–15-year-old workshop group in Lebanon discussed their concerns about the lack of community response to violence in the home:

*No one can report her family when they are abusing them. Even if the neighbours make the report, they [the family] will say it's not the neighbours' business, then everyone will turn on the neighbours, and they will be the bad ones. (Girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon)*

The participants recognised that violence against children in the home was against the law, but pointed out that "right now, there are no laws. This is a lawless time" (girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon). In addition, they expressed a lack of faith in how authorities would respond to accusations made by children against the adults in their family. "Even if you tell Save the Children staff, for example," one said, "they will only talk to your father, to your family"<sup>22</sup> (girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon).

This lack of confidence in law enforcement or protection of human rights extended beyond violence within the home to violence experienced elsewhere in society. The same group of girls explained that the person you accuse could retaliate in a violent way.

*If someone used violence with me, my family wouldn't make a report about the person because they would fear the person. Maybe he would be a weapons dealer or something like that. (Girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon)*

Another Syrian girl described the wider community as a jungle where only the fittest and strongest and most brutal (or immoral or violent) would survive, and herself as a bird, small and relatively vulnerable.

*I am a bird in the jungle, amid all these monsters. (Girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon)*

Thus, the perception of widespread criminal elements in their society and lack of law enforcement was a significant inhibitor of voice, not only for adolescents but for everyone in the community.

Related to this was the lack of social trust in their community. Boys in the 16–19-year-old workshop group in Lebanon felt their voices were highly constrained by a social environment where few could be completely trusted. Some of those from Syria described the legacies of life in Syria where people would say, "the walls have ears!" They alluded to the violence that could be meted out to those that spoke out against the political, economic, and tribal elites: "We all know. We saw what happened to some people" (boy, 16–19 years, Lebanon). Asked whether the situation was

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<sup>22</sup> The workshop staff present during this discussion reassured them that the Save the Children staff would always respond with great care for the child's safety: "No, they will find the best way to deal with it. They will do it carefully. You can be anonymous. They will find a way to protect you, and not just tell your parents. Because there is a law and you have rights, you have special laws that will protect you as a child."

different now that they were in Lebanon, the same boy replied, “Yes, it's better, but it's still not safe in the community.” Asked what would happen if he stopped being cautious, another boy interjected, “You will be in danger. For example, a person can be bullied” (boys, 16–19 years). Another agreed:

*If you say the right thing in the community they will listen, but I am careful in the community. (Boy, 16–19 years, Lebanon).*

The lack of trust could be within their own (Syrian) community as well as beyond it. Feeling conspicuous as an identifiable refugee in an environment where there is widespread suspicion or hostility towards newcomers was a further inhibitor of voice. Girls in particular noted this reality. One said, “I'm a refugee, I'm a Syrian. They [the host community] don't treat me well” (girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon). She depicted her experience as one of being conspicuous or noticeable in a negative way, because her experiences of discrimination and unwanted attention due to being identifiable as a refugee suggested she could not trust the wider community to care about her right to safety.

Furthermore, gender discrimination within the community meant that wider society did not trust girls, and, therefore, dismissed or ignored their voices. One subject that caused the participants in the Za'atari girls' workshop considerable frustration and concern was the way that women were always blamed.

*The community imposes their opinion on everybody. If they saw a girl walking with a guy, they blame all girls for that. But when you go and investigate, you will find out the girl is very nice and polite, and she didn't do anything wrong and she was a victim of the community. (Girl, 14–17 years, Za'atari)*

*[As a] woman you can lose your honour and your reputation. But the man does not. Like, if I wanted to go to college or to travel, they [the community] will say that I am ashamed [dishonoured, immoral, loose] and they will create stories about that. (Girl, 14–17 years, Za'atari)*

For girls, their experiences of silencing due to lawlessness and impunity in wider society were compounded by the fact that girls—and young people more generally—are undervalued in their communities and, therefore, easily dismissed, ignored, or overridden. All of the girls in the workshops had much to say about their experiences of voicelessness in wider society. In East Amman, one girl commented,

*I am friendly with everyone and I am strong. Lots of people come to me and ask for my wisdom and I listen carefully but I don't do the same with them. I think I am like water, I feed people but nobody can feed the water with water. (Girl, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 1)*

A girl in the Za'atari workshop group observed that youth was seen as a sign of ignorance.

*Because I am young, if any older person, whether man or woman, makes a problem with me, they [the community] will take that person's side because they say that I am not wise or I don't understand life. They support the older ones rather than me. (Girl, 14–17 years, Za'atari)*

The twelve girls in the Za'atari workshop believed the shrinking space for girls' voices in particular was because the community simply saw them as future wives and mothers, serving their families, rather than individuals with the potential to create their own future.

*No-one listens to the opinion of the girl, she is not important ... Underage marriage is a huge problem and girls being withdrawn from the school is also a big problem, as this means they don't have the chance to get an education. Even if the girl is working to help her family financially, that is also a big problem. There are so many pressures from the community that stop girls being able to focus on creating a future for herself, because in the end, she will get married and just serve her husband and kids. (Girl, 14–17 years, Za'atari)*

Another girl expressed her frustration with community expectations of and demands on young women. She saw this as short-sighted as, from her point of view, young women could be powerful change agents in their communities, if they were only given the chance to do this, and the respect they deserve.

*I haven't had an issue with the community because I am not doing something wrong. But the community is hard on us. They gave us this [limited, constrained, dysfunctional] life, then they say 'you are a generation of losers'. They compare us [the girls] with boys but we can be better than the boys and we can change the community's lives and their [the boys'?] lives for the better. The girls can be the solution to so many problems. We should be [respected] the same – if the community would just give us a chance. (Girl, 14–17 years, Za'atari)*

The girls from Za'atari named their song 'Girl of Peace', a further indication of their convictions that young women hold many of the solutions for their community.

### 3.3.6. Voice in wider society for people with a disability

The three factors discussed as inhibiting voices in wider society—the normalisation of violence and lawlessness; the lack of social trust; and the undervaluing of the voices of girls and young people—are amplified and compounded for young people with a disability. One of the workshop participants in East Amman was a wheelchair user. She described her voice as having almost no chance of being heard in her community. The reasons for this included the inaccessibility of public space, schools, and other institutions, and the lack of supportive infrastructure and resources for those with disabilities. Furthermore, her voice was silenced not only because of the absence of appropriate supports for her inclusion, but also because their absence ensured her dependence on others for her access to vocal space. Her participation in the workshop was facilitated by a parent who waited outside in the cold for the full length of the workshop.

This participant reminded the group that having a voice in the wider community needed to include being able to access the community as a physical space.

*I don't meet the community because I don't see them very often. I don't go out, not to school, not out in the streets. I dropped out of school without finishing my studies. It's like I have withdrawn from society.*

She recognised that her lack of visibility compounded her lack of voice, creating a self-perpetuating condition of invisibility and inaudibility.

*Maybe they would listen to me if I had the chance [to speak, because] I have a voice! But it isn't loud enough. Maybe my voice would be more audible if I were more active in society.*

Joining in her group's conversation about positive self-talk, and the strength of the secret inner voice (Section 3.3.7), she demonstrated a refusal to accept other people's discouragement, and staunch independence and faith in herself.

*I listen to myself, because there are some things you should only share with yourself. And you can teach yourself things and encourage yourself. Even if someone drags me down, I sit with myself and I start again. I help myself.*

The metaphor she selected for her experience of voice—a faraway bright light— was hopeful of change but recognised that her potential to contribute to her community was dependent on others looking further into the metaphorical distance. They needed to notice her light shining brightly in the distance.

*I feel like I am a faraway bright light in the distance. I am there but I am far away. The people haven't discovered me yet. Maybe I would have a voice if I could meet them. There will [needs to] be someone discovering me.*

As with many other participants in this research, 'voice' for her was synonymous with the freedom to fly and be all that she could be. Hers was not the only voice silenced by a cage door, but she reminded the group of the lack of essential support she would find, if she were to open the door herself.

*Right now, I am like a bird in a cage. I need someone to unlock the door for me to be able to fly like a bird. Or, maybe I can open it myself, but there is no support. (Girl, 14–17 years, East Amman, group 1)*

This participant chose to speak about having a low voice in the wider community. As the group's attention turned to her, she said self-consciously, "I wish it wasn't my turn to speak." But her community, and the wider community including those who wish to widen opportunities for adolescents in the region, need to hear what she and others have to say. Her contribution underscores the urgency with which society needs to proactively create the space for her voice, and those of others who, because of social structures that exclude them through inaccessibility and prejudice, are largely invisible and inaudible, and therefore, stuck in metaphorical cages with few opportunities to fly or sing.

### 3.3.7. In my own head

In each of the workshop groups, there were individuals who described their strongest voice as being that which they had cultivated for themselves, which remained predominantly in their own heads. While it could not always be audibly expressed in the different domains of the socio-ecological model, it was nevertheless an experience of voice that was incredibly important to them. For many, it was a key source of identity and self-actualisation.

One of the Syrian boys in Turkey declared that he had decided that he could no longer depend on others, and that it was important to follow his own counsel and be independent. Asked about the biggest decision he had made for himself, he said:

*To be alone, that was a biggest thing to do, to stay alone since I was 16. I don't live alone, but most of the time I stay alone. I depend on myself, and I don't ask anyone about my issues. (Boy, 14–18 years, Turkey).*

He described himself as a silent painting, adding, "I have so many things to say but I say it visually" (boy, 14–18 years, Turkey).

Numerous other workshop participants made similar statements. For some, trust was an issue, usually after having experienced some kind of betrayal. A girl in Turkey explained that while she had a solid circle of friends to whom she offered support and a listening ear, she did not trust them as confidants, and tried to only "listen to [her]self." She continued:

*I prefer not to share things with anyone. [Why? Did something happen to you?] Yes, once I shared things with some friends who were like sisters to me, and they shared my secrets with everybody. Ever since that time, I have stopped sharing my issues. (Girl, 14 years, Turkey)*

Other times, the need to be independent was forced upon adolescents through the absence of a loving or trusted elder. For example, one girl in East Amman explained:

*I don't have anyone close to me that I can talk to. Ever since my dad passed away, I haven't talked about my difficulties with anyone. Once I tried it and that didn't help, so I decided that I have to solve my own problems and I have to be brave. (Girl, 14–16 years, East Amman, group 2)*

Another girl in the same group described a similar situation: that since the death of her father, she had had nobody to talk to. She felt that she listened to others, but nobody—not her family, not her friends—listened to her and let her speak. (Girl, 14–16 years, East Amman, group 2).

*Nobody listens to me; my whole family doesn't listen to me. My dad used to listen to my problems, but he passed away. I listen to my family but they don't do it with me, no friends, nobody. (Girl, 14–16 years, East Amman, group 2)*

For many of the girls in Jordan (East Amman and Za'atari), there was a need to cultivate, strengthen and protect the voice *inside oneself*. Few expressed any degree of faith that their voices would be well received, the further beyond the family and friendship group they went. This led to a positive sense of self-efficacy and independence for some, but one that could evolve into a concerning degree of isolation and self-protection.

*I listen to myself; I make my own decisions and I don't like someone to interfere with my decisions and I convince myself with things. [Do you have someone to talk to?] No, because the ones around always say 'No,' so I listen to my inner voice. Some subjects are personal, and I feel that I have to fix them by myself. I don't want to hear 'No' from anyone. It's my issue and my life. (Girl, 14–17 years, Za'atari)*

*Nobody cares about me more than I do, not family, not friends. You have to depend on yourself and encourage yourself. I have so much jealousy and I always want to be like others ... But I am like a turtle, I can reach my goals but I need time because I am slow. (Girl, 14–17 years, Za'atari)*

These kinds of statements made it clear that while the lack of support for their voices in various spaces in their social ecologies had rendered many adolescents' voices inaudible, it had not silenced them. They were still speaking, planning, imagining, and fighting; the space inside their heads could function as a rehearsal space for later external challenges, and a reassuring space. This is not sufficient, but the maintenance of these very private spaces is testament to adolescents' desire to speak, be heard, and influence things more publicly.

However, the comments also make clear that **voice and trust are interconnected**. Many adolescents feel extremely isolated, particularly girls, and struggle to trust others – friends, siblings, adults – often because they fear betrayal. The sense that they are unable to trust others can become self-perpetuating. Deliberately isolating themselves from others can mean they do not reach out to others or nurture any existing connections, which leaves them even more isolated. Furthermore, with this research concerned with collective power as a desirable focus for adolescent

programs, such widespread mistrust of others has concerning implications for building a culture of collective action and engagement.

The emergence of (the absence of) trust as a theme in this research raises new questions that were outside the scope of this project but are important to consider.<sup>23</sup> More needs to be understood about how trust intersects with the experience of war and displacement, and with adolescent psychological development and social-emotional wellbeing. Does trusting get easier or more difficult as one gets older? What are the factors that help to overcome this? Future research with adolescents in the region should consider these questions.

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<sup>23</sup> I thank Natalia Tapias for articulating these questions and the helpful reflections she shared on the connections between trust and collective power.

## 4. Interpretation of metaphors and songs

### 4.1. Metaphors and meaning

The songwriting process employed metaphor as a way for adolescents to explore their experiences without having to depict them using plain or explicit speech. Inviting the participants to think in metaphors and apply metaphoric labels to their experiences served both psychological and creative benefits. It provided an expressive tool for presenting difficult ideas or experiences to the group with a degree of psychological distance from them, and helped the participants to engage playfully in the imaginative, creative realm. Metaphors provided space for them to reflect on their experiences through different perspectives. Importantly for this research, metaphoric language also functions as a knowledge translation tool, helping to make young people's lived experiences more knowable and actionable to others<sup>24</sup> (Woodgate et al., 2021).

The workshop facilitator Ameen encouraged the participants to think of metaphor as a 'hidden language', a way to say something about their experience that others could understand but that retained some ambiguity. Some of the adolescents engaged with this deeply, finding parallels in the natural world (animals, insects, ice caps, trees) that could help to illustrate an aspect of their experience of 'voice'. In some groups, they gravitated elements from their everyday lives—household objects, famous people, roles they already play—to describe their experience.

The metaphors selected across the workshop groups were wide ranging, capturing how adolescents view the world and themselves in it, and the relationships that shape their experience of voice with considerable nuance:

- *Birds, butterflies* and other winged creatures suggested that for the adolescents, 'voice' was analogous with freedom, and the ability to place oneself above and at a distance from the drama and action of the world, as well as to have the opportunity to 'stretch one's wings' and move swiftly from one location to another.
- *Trees* as metaphors suggested a community role of giving (providing fruit, shade, home to birds) but also of belonging and place (through being planted in the ground, with roots going down deep) and of growth and increasing strength.
- Natural elements, such as *sun, light, and fire*, suggesting some saw their voice as a source of light and ignition for others.
- *Constraints* on freedom of movement – such as '*bird in a cage*' and '*fish in the sea*'—indicated an awareness that their access to having a voice was often conditioned or controlled by more powerful others or social forces.

*I'm a kid and I know I have rights, but no-one listens to me outside the family. So, my family is a space where I have a strong voice, but it is also like a cage, a limiting factor. (Girl, 14–15, Lebanon, explaining her chosen metaphor for her voice as a 'bird in a cage').*

- Equating one's voice to having an on/off button—like a '*turned-off TV*' or a *torch*—communicated an experience of the use of their voice depending on another person's agreement to allow them to speak. *Microphone with a cut cable* indicated the way one person's voice could be vandalised and silenced by another's acts.

*I am like a window – each time I want to talk they close me like a window. (Boy, 14–17 years, East Amman)*

- The prefix of the word '*annoying*' in front of other nouns—'*an annoying beep in the street*', '*the annoying one*'—or the selection of animals considered by many to be pests—'*a mouse*', '*a pigeon*', '*a cat*'—indicated

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<sup>24</sup> Woodgate, R. L., Tennent, P., & Legras, N. (2021). Understanding Youth's Lived Experience of Anxiety through Metaphors: A Qualitative, Arts-Based Study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(8), 4315. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18084315>

that adolescents were aware that their voices (and opinions and ideas) were not welcome in some of the social spaces they inhabit.

- Complex metaphors, such as *ice sculpting*, that captured the ephemeral and artistic/strategic quality of some interactions and experiences, and the impermanence of the vocal space.
- Inanimate, everyday objects, such as *chair, table, shelf*, were selected to depict experiences of being taken for granted, used, and easily discarded or replaced. However, *house pillar* was selected to depict a meaningful and responsible role within the family.
- Metaphors represented guarded personalities, and the decision to remain somewhat closed off and private from others, while also reliable, such as *locked box* and *safe*.
- The prefix '*silent*' in front of a powerful, vocally strong animal suggested a stifled, suppressed, or forbidden potential.
- *Endangerment and extinction* took the idea of constrained or denied potential even further, but added a layer of urgency and a rapidly closing window of time for action is limited. Given the indications that young women's experience of voice *decreases* as they reach their older teenage years, this sense of urgency and a rapidly closing window of opportunity for action was both apt and sobering. It shows that the younger adolescent girls have a sense of what their future may hold, even while they continue to hold out hope that they will still be able to realise their full human potential with their community's support.

### *I chose the white gazelle, because it is endangered, and needs protection (Girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon)*

The idea of being a '*Silent Lion*', as proposed by a boy in the 14–15 age group (Lebanon) and selected as the title metaphor for this report, exemplifies the experience of constrained voices and potential. A lion is typically associated with strength and authority. It has a loud strong voice; its roar might prompt fear as well as respect among others in the animal kingdom. Certainly, it is heard and listened to! The idea of a Silent Lion is, therefore, striking. We might ask what has happened to render this lion silent. Is its voice ever heard? It might also conjure images of a circus lion, roaring on cue, but essentially imprisoned and forced to act out a tamed, constrained version of its immense potential.

Similarly, a boy, 16–19 years (Lebanon), reminded a fellow participant that the wolf, his chosen metaphor, might be free, but still have no voice. The symbolism of selecting a powerful animal as a totem, but then rendering it voiceless was unambiguous. Several chose *turtle* to represent determination to achieve their goals, but at a slow and steady pace.

Some struggled with the ambiguity of metaphors. One group of boys chose to label their experiences in more aspirational ways, proposing professions (*teacher, footballer, engineer*), familiar roles (*goalkeeper, friend*), and human qualities (*peaceful person*) as their metaphoric labels.

The following wordcloud (Figure 14) shows the frequency of the words that adolescents across the three countries used to depict their individual experiences of voice and power. Together, the engagement with metaphor suggests the adolescents are aware of their potential, and the legitimacy of their voices, but that many struggle to find a space in which they can grow this potential, find platforms for their voices, increase their audience, and amplify their message.



**I will continue until the end**  
**My dream must be fulfilled**  
**continue this way [to my destination]**  
**continue this way [to my destination]**  
**Butterfly flew sadly [in despair]**  
**From one city to another**  
**Searching for serenity**  
**She found tranquillity.**

In this song, there are three things that evoke something poignant about the adolescent girls' experience. First is the butterfly's sense of searching and yearning. Unable to settle, it flies from city to city, seeking an experience of peace, tranquillity, and serenity. Second is the cyclic structure, where the song opens and closes with the same four lines. Even though the butterfly "finds tranquillity," she remains unsettled. Third is the dramatic shift in voice from the third person ('the butterfly') to the first person ('I will continue'). This emphasises the girls' voices, the intensity of their quest to find a place where their dreams—unstated but pervasive—can be fulfilled. By moving to first person speech in the heart of the song, they implicitly claim space for their own voices. They no longer speak through the butterfly but position themselves in the centre of the narrative.

#### 4.2.2. The Cute Bird

Songwriters: Boys, Lebanon, 14–15 years

The 14–15-year-old boys also chose to write about 'voice' as a winged creature. However, their winged creature, a bird, did not actually fly. Rather, it entertained others by dancing and singing, winning a place in their hearts and, therefore, their protection and kindness.

**A bird with an unheard voice,**  
**The people ignored him.**  
**He was small,**  
**Very small.**  
**Then he started singing, that bird.**  
**He started dancing.**  
**He started swirling [spinning].**  
**So, people started watching him**  
**They started dancing,**  
**They started mimicking him [dancing like him].**  
**He got into their hearts, that bird.**  
**He went to sleep,**  
**Full of happiness.**

This song has a happy ending but the happiness is highly conditional. To win the care and interest of the people, the small bird must make itself more appealing. It does this by performing, by being engaging and cute, so that the people are drawn towards it, and ultimately start to love it. While there is agency and choice in the bird's actions, we can see that it is not fully free nor autonomous. Its ability to rest and sleep peacefully depends on it being able to charm people.

We might ask, what would happen to this bird if it were not so charming? The 14–15-year-old boys used the word ‘cute’ several times in their workshop. Being cute perhaps has social and cultural value for them. But cuteness is also infantilising (e.g., adults are not ‘cute’). Cuteness ensures the power dynamics remain unchanged. The cute bird might have won the hearts of the more powerful people and, therefore, found safety, but it can never be truly free. Therefore, its current happiness is likely to be short lived.

### 4.2.3. White Gazelles

Songwriters: Girls, Lebanon, 16–19 years

The older girls, 16–19 years, gave much of their discussion time to the issue of ‘deeply rooted mentalities’ in their community that severely limited girls’ opportunities to live full and free lives. Their song developed through a participatory analytical process of examining all the metaphoric words and labels they had selected to capture their experiences of ‘voice’ in the different dimensions of the socio-ecological model, and then drawing these into a single narrative.

**There’s a freedom crisis [lack of freedom].**

**Air and voice have been cut**

**Muted, we were**

**We try to talk, but we can’t.**

**We transformed into shut-down radios**

**Like white gazelles, we’re vanishing**

**Cold like snow,**

**Stray like thoughts,**

**Withered like flowers.**

**But we are night stars.**

**We are revolutionary lights and fires,**

**Defending freedom**

**Against rooted mentalities.**

**The pen has turned [in]to lots of voices**

**Screaming on fields,**

**Flying with wings.**

The first half of the song denotes their experience of voicelessness, of being ‘muted’, trying to talk but in an absence of air and voice. They speak about transformation, from their sense of selves full of potential, possibility, intelligence, and joy, into shut-down radios (awaiting someone to power them on) and endangered animals. We sense their desperation, and their self-awareness of their freshness and vibrancy withering, like a flower cut from its branches, ornamental for a while, until it withers and dies. The imagery is chilling in its finality.

The second half of the song fights back. It is a call to action, and a warning. “We are night stars ... revolutionary lights and fires.” They anticipate collective action as they describe the way that the (single) pen has been transformed into lots of voices, loud, angry, and no longer imprisoned. But this is not retaliation or revenge, it is activism, driven by the desire for freedom for all. It demands to be listened to. These voices are ready to act and to claim public space, but they need support.

#### 4.2.4. The Jungle

Songwriters: Boys, 16–19 years, Lebanon

The older boys wrote a song using classical Arabic that followed a similar strategy to that of the 16–19-year-old girls. They gathered up all their metaphoric labels and created a narrative arc that could include them all. For this group, the metaphor of ‘the jungle’ aptly captured their lived experience in Lebanon, its polarised politics, and the legacies of the war in Syria.

**My alertness in the woods**  
**Resembles that of a fox fearing death.**  
**Responsible for my people.**  
**The screams of death make me ache**  
**And people cry without a voice**  
**And people [leave my country] without a voice:**  
**From wars,**  
**From lions and tigers.**  
**We argue with whom we should run.**  
**With a responsible lion?**  
**Or a rebellious tiger?**  
**Our fear is huge;**  
**Out of hunger and of thirst,**  
**Out sickness and of poverty,**  
**Out of war and of peace,**  
**Oppression is growing**  
**Day by day.**  
**I live in disdain [oppression] and in war.**  
**I am lost [confused]**  
**Like a whirlpool swirling and swirling.**

In these lyrics we experience the 16–19-year-old boys’ multiple internal tensions. First, there is the tension arising from the sense of responsibility that the young men feel, to be protecting others, alert to danger, and setting aside their own fears of death in order to lead others. Then there is the dilemma of the war itself: “With whom should we run? With a responsible lion? Or a rebellious tiger?” They recognise their own mortal weaknesses, where fear, hunger, thirst, sickness and poverty converge to make peace—in oneself? In one’s land? In one’s community?—elusive. The song ends with the metaphor of a whirlpool, which sucks all within its currents into its vortex, pulling them down underwater. This song captures how stuck the older boys feel, how aware they are of their limited options. While they may enjoy stronger voices than their sisters, they are trying to be men in a violent, dangerous environment without the chance to fully mature first.

For these young men, the layers of responsibility and relative powerlessness make voice a low priority. First, they must survive. Then, they must help others to survive and try to rebuild a semblance of humane life. Only then might their voices be able to speak freely. In the meantime, they must try to find their own path, independent of the lions and tigers that seek to benefit from and maintain their oppression.

Given these pressures, is it any surprise that when Ameen first began to improvise melodies for this song, one of the boys looked moved to tears? Music was able to penetrate the armour of toughness he had built up, allowing him to see for a moment the pressures with which he contended on a daily basis.

#### 4.2.5. The Friends

Songwriters: Boys, Za'atari camp, 14–17 years, all Syrian

The boys in Za'atari found inspiration in the metaphor of a hive of bees, and the interdependence of the different roles (the Queen Bee, the worker bees, etc.) within the swarm. Initially, they were going to call their song “The Bee Swarm”, but then worried that this was a bit cheesy, given “we are not bees.” They, therefore, chose ‘The Friends’ as the song title, and indeed, this group of 17 boys was friendly and supportive of each other, teasing and joking and acknowledging their differences without rancour.

**In my life there are friends**

**Brothers and loyal**

**Some of them are peaceful**

**Some keep secrets**

**Some are weak**

**Afraid of bad guys.**

**Some love problems**

**Some love to defend**

**Some love to attack**

**Some love to get lost.**

**One is an engineer**

**One is a teacher**

**One is a captain**

**Likes to rush.**

**Beehive**

**Gives honey.**

**Gives wax.**

**Gives hope.**

**We are all in order,**

**A team in harmony.**

**We are in the team.**

**Beehive.**

This song recognises the diversity in the group and implies that there is a role for everyone, and room for everyone, even those who do not wish to play a prominent or leadership role, who are “afraid of bad guys” and prefer “to get lost.” The lyrics ask us to recognise all that they give: their team is productive; its social contributions span the material (honey and wax) and the affective and psychological (hope). Being in a swarm (or hive, or team) is important to these boys. The sense of belonging this gives confirms that they are *right*, that they have a place in the social group. Their song emphasises the positive; but their discussions of voice also revealed the ways that being part of the collective can also reduce their agency, and their autonomy.

#### 4.2.6. Girl of Peace

Songwriters: Girls, Za'atari camp, 14–17 years, (all Syrian)

The Za'atari girls' workshop group spoke at length about their sense of being overlooked and underestimated by their wider community. Girls, they believed, were part of the solution to the community's concerns, rather than a group that needed to be controlled and blamed for other people's bad behaviour. As they worked on the lyrics for their song 'Girl of Peace', Ameen observed that, "it sounds like a rap!" They were excited by this, as none of them had created a rap before. In the recording you can hear the great confidence and energy with which they performed their song.

**I'm briefly**  
**A girl of peace**  
**Glimmer of hope**  
**Planted rose**  
**Raised [nurtured] tree**  
**Solid and steadfast**  
**No one affects us.**  
**Your words to us**  
**Beautiful with my steadfastness**  
**Innocent of my existence.**  
**Girl of peace**  
**Heeey**  
**Girl of peace (2x)**

**Express yourself**  
**Live your life**  
**Be strong**  
**Live freely**  
**Don't be absent—**  
**Be present**  
**Cling to your wishes**  
**Realise yourself**  
**Girl of peace**  
**Heeey**  
**Girl of peace (2x)**

The first verse of 'Girl of Peace' is directed towards outsiders and speaks of unseen or disregarded potential. The girls recognise themselves as peace agents, but only 'briefly', a window of time that offers 'a glimmer' of what might be possible. They use metaphors of plants that are growing—a rose, a tree—that will have sprung from seeds in the ground, their roots giving stability and a place of belonging, so that they can be "solid and steadfast". The idea of "steadfastness" implies resilience, a capacity to withstand external pressures. In other words, while they may appear fragile or insufficiently grown, they are, the lyrics assure us, "beautiful with their steadfastness."

In the second verse, the lyrics address other girls, asking them to see themselves as full of potential and capacity. "Live your life ... realise yourself" they urge. There are thus inward and outward messages in the song. To the outward audience—parents, brothers, teachers, employers, community members—the message is, "we are here and we have

lots to offer!" To the inward audience—theirself, and their fellow adolescent girls—the message is, "*Believe in yourself. They are not ready for us yet, but we must continue to grow and be all that we can be.*" The chorus and title of the song, "Girl of Peace", reminds us that sustainable, lasting, community-owned peace requires *all* social injustices to be addressed. Adolescent girls deal with many injustices and are blamed for others' wrongdoings but should be part of the community's pathway to peace.

#### 4.2.7. Difficult Teenage Age

Songwriters: Boys, East Amman, all Jordanian

The East Amman boys felt that the main 'theme' that captured all their experiences was the idea of a "Difficult Teenage Age", meaning the period of life in which one is a teenager, preparing for adulthood, but still relatively powerless. The boys felt strongly that they were constantly being controlled by others, and that they were often being used. The metaphors they chose throughout their discussions indicated this lack of agency: low-volume headphones, window, closed box, bag, television, table, curtain. Others carried agency and threat (needle) while other words implied hidden potential and authority (treasure, father, perfume, humble person, turtle).

**A humble person**

**Free like a flying balloon.**

**[Like] a big box**

**Very tightly closed**

**Full of secrets**

**Full of news.**

**His voice is not loud**

**But the price of his voice is high.**

**Like an impenetrable, opaque window**

**Shutting out the voices**

**You can't see**

**Of tales**

**Of screams.**

**His pain is great (X4).**

**They control him like a TV**

**They sit on him like a shelf**

**He must carry loads like a table**

**They hide things in him like a closet**

**He covers people up like a curtain [hiding their secrets].**

**His way to success is**

**Full of obstacles, full of holes,**

**and wasp stings.**

**Right now, he's slow as a turtle**

**But his dream one day will come true [X4]**

This song is filled with tensions. We have the sense that this person—“full of secrets, full of news”—could be about to explode. And when he does, he will release voices, tales, and screams that currently are out of sight, ignored, and unheeded. Carrying these voices, tales, and screams is intense, and a source of pain.

But despite the weight he carries (perhaps because it is not so easily seen by others), the humble person is further burdened. He is pushed around, asked to carry things, to secure secrets and hide their tellers. He is constantly navigating treacherous and dangerous terrain. But despite this, he is forging a path in which he has faith. The song references the fable of ‘the turtle and the hare’ in which the turtle refuses to panic about its slow pace or modest, unheralded social position. It continues on its chosen path, towards its dreams. The image of the turtle is also one that portrays independence, and a defensive shell: the turtle carries its home on its back, able to retreat inside its shell to protect itself from threats. The boys in East Amman are Jordanian, not refugees, but perhaps the image of the nomadic turtle is one that appeals when their lived conditions produce threats and risks rather than a sense of security.

#### 4.2.8. The Notebook (Just a little revolution...)

Songwriters: Girls, East Amman, group 2 (11 Jordanian, 1 Syrian)

Asked what word or title could capture the list of metaphors and labels they had chosen through their discussions of the voice, the group of girls chose the word Notebook. Perhaps it suggested a private location in which quiet intentions could be recorded. The notebook suggests a place where ideas can still be developed, crossed out, written over, but also underlined, highlighted, and made ready for a public sharing.

The girls in this group had knowledge of Arabic poetry, and one had been schooled in the ‘seven seas’, the strict rules of poetic metre in the Classical style. She took some convincing that poetry and lyric-writing could break the strict rules and still be poetry. It didn’t have to rhyme. Sometimes, one’s voice needs to break free of constraints.

**A soaring sound [i.e., a sound flying free]**

**has a goal**

**in the dark.**

**A loud voice**

**Has a word**

**In the crisis.**

**Like a flying missile**

**Wherever it goes**

**It has a revolutionary goal.**

**But it's a flower that wants just a little water,**

**A pen that wants just a little sharpening,**

**A car that needs just a small repair**

**So it can drive so very well.**

The ideas in this song depict the idea of being ready to dream and to act, even when no-one can see (because it is dark, or because people are distracted by the crisis). The ‘goals and words’ that are present are not passive, nor benign goals and words; they are *revolutionary* (indeed, one of the adults in this room suggested they might change this word to something less disruptive, but the girls stood by their choice). That is, they are concerned with radical change. The girls know there is a big world, they know that there is a life that’s available to them. They believe they can have it ... they have hope and determination. But they also know that they will need just a little support and care—like water for a flower, a sharpener for a pencil, or a small repair—in order to realise that potential, to show what they can do, in order to “drive so very well.”

Workshop facilitator Ameen, reflecting on this song, said it reminded him of Fairouz's songs. There was an open-hearted honesty, vulnerability, and beguiling quality to the way the girls asked, in their lyrics, for 'just a little help' to reach their goals. They knew they were not asking for much in terms of the investment of others. But it is an investment and trust that will make all the difference.

#### 4.2.9. Strong but Weak

Songwriters: Girls, East Amman, group 2 (all Jordanians)

The song composed by the second girls' group in East Amman captures both their faith in their own strength and their sense of social isolation. This was the group that spoke about street harassment in euphemistic terms, and that used the image of a screaming rabbit to convey their vulnerability in the face of imminent, potentially fatal, danger. Many in the group spoke of misplaced trust and betrayals and of feeling alone, apart from (for some) with their friends. During the development of the lyrics, Ameen constantly reminded them of their own voices.

**I am strong like the sea wave**

**Nobody can defeat me**

**So fast like a wolf**

**Don't see me as a poor [weak] one**

**I am honest like a safe**

**Everybody is trusting me**

**Free like a bird**

**The sky is too small for me [compared with my spirit and feeling, it is not big enough]**

**I am the juriah, the Damascene Rose, red like blood [I am a Red Rose]**

**I am thirsty**

**I want water**

**I want some shade**

**I want you to check up on me.**

Like several of the other songs, these lyrics capture the dual sense that many adolescents have of their voice, and their access to power. Within themselves, they feel strong, fast, and capable. They recognise their reliability and willingness to support others in their community, but also wish to live an unrestrained life. The central image is that of the Damascene rose, its symbolism reaching beyond its beauty to convey possible meanings such as its high-value perfume and oil, its healing powers, its associations with the three main religions, but also a capacity to defend oneself in the form of thorns.

But in the last four lines, we are given an indication of the tiredness that comes with social isolation and feeling that they have no-one they can trust with their voice. The girls' plea is unambiguous: please check up on me; don't leave me to myself; I can be independent, if you just keep me inside your orbit, even if only a little. Despite knowing that "the sky is too small" for spirits as vast as theirs, they nevertheless ask for help in a way that ensures they will not take up much space.

#### 4.2.10. A Voice

Songwriters: Boys, Turkey, 14–18 years

This group of Syrian boys had lived much of their lives in Turkey. They did not read or write Arabic fluently. However, as they wrote the song, the lyrics transitioned from colloquial Arabic to the (more formal) classical Arabic, lending the centre of the song a storytelling quality and poetic, wise sensibility.

**Something needs a voice**  
**[There's a] painting of a gemstone**  
**Hung on the wall.**  
**Its meaning is deep down in the heart**  
**like a poem**  
**Written by a great poet**  
**Sung to a patient singer (a Munshid)**  
*[the classical Arabic starts here]*  
**It made all the audience happy.**  
**He planted seeds**  
**And he was patient with it**  
**Played by a beautiful musician**  
**On the shores of the Nile**  
**Like the sweet breeze**  
**Made the gemstone speak.**  
**The sun shone again.**  
**All the ice melted.**  
**The iron [bells] rang again,**  
**The blissful time came back again.**  
*[Back to Syrian dialect]*  
**This a story of a voice**  
**Today, the voice doesn't want to die.**  
**The voice doesn't want the silence to prevail again,**  
**Back to the dark times of yore [the dark old ages].**

The metaphor of the gemstone came from one of the group, who was explaining the way that his suggested innovations at his workplace had been ignored, so he set up his own business and has since been successful. This boy described himself as a gemstone, because “I am worthy and valuable, but I am covered in dirt. No-one has discovered me yet.”

The boys debated their opening line—should they say ‘Something needs a voice’ or ‘A thing needs a voice’? They were conscious that the choice of ‘something’ created ambiguity, giving the impression of a general statement rather than a condition that could be attributed to the gemstone in the painting. This was a deliberate choice, a way to create additional layers and questions.

Already, this song is replete with layers of meaning. It describes a gemstone, frozen in a painting, which symbolises a person with a similarly frozen, static voice. The music, work of the poet and the Munshid, the singing, the patience, and the sweet breeze help to restore the voice to the gemstone. As the song moves into the classical Arabic mode, the voice also comes to life, its restoration marked by joyous sounds, like iron ringing out like bells.

Voice, in this song, is a way of reclaiming life and flourishing. But it requires external supports—the poetry, the singing, the sweet breeze.

#### 4.2.11. A Story of a Sea

Songwriters: Girls, Turkey, 14–18 years, Syrian

With their song, the songwriters wanted to portray the different personalities in their group. The mermaid reflects one girl's self-description as "a little girl who knows nothing," and another girl's portrayal of herself as a mermaid (a *huriya*, a precious, revered being) in her family. Another girl described herself as feeling like a "butterfly in the sky" whenever she talked with the one adult member of her family whom she felt truly loved and protected her. The pirate's weapon of choice (fire and rocks) reflects the volcano that one girl used as a metaphor to describe the fiery anger she felt towards racist people. The song opens with very calm, almost peaceful music. But this was not a calm nor peaceful group and they knew their song needed to include "more energy, more anger!" The central four lines are sung at a dramatically faster tempo, and repeated twice, before the more peaceful music resumes.

**There was a little mermaid  
She knew nothing about the sea  
One day a pirate came  
And he started shooting fire and rocks.  
This very small, amphibious mermaid  
She knew nothing about the wilderness.  
A butterfly was flying  
And that worthless villain damaged her wings  
She fell in the water and started to drown  
The mermaid saw her, the butterfly was choking  
She went up so fast [to the surface of] the water  
And she heard the butterfly cry out in pain, "Oww!"  
She [mermaid] held her [butterfly], saying, "you poor thing,  
These [pirate] crimes should stop."  
  
That news was everywhere,  
Then the king of the sea heard about it.  
He became very angry with the pirate  
Who made the butterfly unable to fly. (2x)  
  
He decided to make wings for her  
To make her very happy.  
This butterfly and the mermaid  
Become very close to each other.  
There was a little mermaid  
She knew nothing about the sea  
One day a pirate came  
And he started shooting fire and rocks.**

In this song, written in story form, we hear of a naïve and innocent mermaid, amphibious yet ignorant of her two worlds (land and sea) and how to navigate them. Yet despite her apparent vulnerability, it is she who goes to the rescue of an injured butterfly, saving her from drowning and offering her protection and friendship.

The greatest threat is from a pirate, a good-for-nothing, waste-of-space villain who “shoots fire and rocks,” like a volcano. There is a benevolent king, who has made new wings for the butterfly. But it is not benevolence she needs, it is safety. The song also portrays a dramatic sense of scale, where the smallness and innocence of the butterfly and the mermaid contrast with the cruelty and violence of the pirate, and the power and largesse of the king. The pirate’s return at the end of the song suggests that, rather than living happily ever after, the only lasting happiness is that which comes from a friendship between two isolated and relatively powerless beings, one made for air, the other made for land and water but unconfident in both. The song is unsettling in its unstable resolution.

## 5. Barriers and inhibiting factors

Reading across the accounts from the four workshop groups, four key factors were identified as playing an inhibiting role in adolescent experiences of voice.

### 5.1. Social norms: age, gender, and rigid traditions

Adolescents painted a picture of a social environment in which their voices were inhibited or muted due to rigid and conservative social norms. Many of the male participants felt that their voices were weak due to being younger within the family. In school, teachers, as older adults in positions of authority, needed to be respected even when they did not respect the rights of the children to receive their education in safety.

*I don't have a voice in the community because I am a child. They will listen when I'm older, when I am a man. I'm a small tree now, but I will continue to grow. (Boy, Lebanon, 14–15 years)*

Boys were also impacted by cultures of violence, where the use of violence to assert authority was normalised, rather than engaging with voices and creating space in which different perspectives might be shared. Social norms of loyalty towards one's peer group or particular friends can result in young men being drawn into violence and retaliation in order to fulfil social expectations of loyalty.

For girls, rigid cultural norms pertaining to acceptable social roles for young woman were significantly impacting their ability to speak, be heard, and be taken seriously in most of their social domains. In the family environment, older girls found the space available for their voices progressively reduced as they approached adulthood (e.g., over the age of 16 years), which was the opposite of their male counterparts' experience.

*The Syrian community is very different and conservative. My opinion will not be listened to because these community traditions cannot be changed. (Girl, Lebanon, 14–15 years)*

The girls' voices were also muted in schools. Girls in Lebanon reported that their potential to engage critically and vocally with socio-political issues was denied due to a very teacher-centric curriculum, and due to the many socio-economic constraints that can see their access to education cut short. Disrespect and hostility from teachers in their schools also led to some young women choosing to cut short their education according to the study's participants; early marriage was also a factor. Young women's desire to be agents of change in their community was challenging to enact, although several of the older girls in the three countries seemed to have been able to do this in online spaces.

### 5.2. Perceptions of lawlessness, impunity, and the normalisation of dominance and stern authority

Discussions and behaviours in some of the workshops indicated that adolescents associated using one's voice to address an injustice with a high risk of retribution or retaliation against the speaker, or other negative social repercussions. These acted as a brake on the idea of trying to claim greater vocal space. Adolescent boys described lived environments in which social power, connections, and status (such as through economic power, family ties, or political connections) were key to being able to access desired opportunities and protecting oneself from exploitation. Adolescent girls in Lebanon described a social environment with "many criminal elements" (girl, 14-15 years, Lebanon), in which the powerful acted with impunity, and fear of retribution inhibited people from reporting crimes. These pressures could be seen to intersect with extreme economic hardship, competition over limited material resources, and the compounding stresses caused by uncertainty about one's prospects in the future.

One of the boys aged 16–19 in Lebanon drew a dollar bill to depict freedom, explaining, "Freedom is something that you must fight for, rather than something you can be given. If someone gives you freedom, then he becomes responsible for [i.e., owns] you." Talking about fights in school, one boy (16–19), said, "in a case where someone has connections, then yes, he can get away with it." In the adolescents' descriptions, the powerful are rarely held to account; rather, the focus is on victims changing their behaviour to keep themselves safe, rather than naming the actual problem.

It was outside the scope of this study to delve further into the drivers of these repressive elements in the three countries and the participants' specific lived environments. Certainly, comparable accounts of lawlessness and insecurity can be found in other literature from the region.<sup>25</sup> Research into post-conflict gender relations and inequalities suggests that these can be legacies of the hegemonic masculinities and militarised norms that are valorised during war. In the post-conflict context, they can manifest in the normalisation of violence (or the threat of violence) as a form of social control, dominance, patronage networks, corruption and nepotism.<sup>26</sup> These will effectively control and condition the amount of vocal space afforded to adolescents as well as their family members and others in their community.

### **5.3. Refugee status: discrimination and unjust treatment**

Several participants (girls and boys) commented that they had experienced discrimination and unjust treatment because they were identifiable as refugees from the Syrian conflict. They felt that this marked them out for unjust and discriminatory behaviour in school, and reduced the opportunities available to them. At the same time, they recognised that many other people in the wider society were being denied justice and equal opportunities, not only the refugees. In Turkey, some girls recognised that there were members of the Syrian community that had behaved badly, and, therefore, brought undue attention onto the whole community and damaged its fragile reputation (girls, 14 years, Turkey). The *perception* of discriminatory attitudes may be as much of a barrier as the actuality of discrimination, because perceptions tend to determine behaviours and the choices that follow.

### **5.4. Low levels of social trust**

A significant number of adolescents described withholding their most personal thoughts and ideas from all others in their social ecologies. Some had learned from bitter experience that those they confided in might betray the confidence; others felt isolated after the death or prolonged absence of a loved one or key supporter. Mistrust at the individual level was further reinforced at the community level, where patterns of dominance, aggression, and impunity had begun to characterise the functioning of many community institutions, reducing trust in people's access to justice and rights.<sup>27</sup>

Trust, and the isolation that arises from its absence, therefore, emerged as an encroaching inhibitor of voice for adolescents. Its absence also has negative implications for building a culture of collective power and community activism, as the lack of trust inhibits people from banding together to work collectively towards a desired change.

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<sup>25</sup> E.g. Jirmanus, L. Z., Ziadee, M., & Usta, J. (2021). Confronting Structural Inequities: The Limits of Participation when Developing a Community Health Intervention with Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Lebanon. *Social Science & Medicine*, 272, 113699. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.113699>; Sajdi, J., Essaid, A., Vila, C. M., Abu Taleb, H., Abu Azzam, M., & Malachowska, A. (2021). 'I Dream of Going Home': Gendered Experiences of Adolescent Syrian Refugees in Jordan's Azraq Camp. *The European Journal of Development Research*, 33(5), 1189-1208. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-021-00450-9>

<sup>26</sup> Discussed in Enloe, C. (2004). *The curious feminist: Searching for women in a new age of empire*. University of California Press; Ní Aoláin, F., Haynes, D., & Cahn, N. (2011). *On the frontlines: Gender, war, and the post-conflict process*. Oxford University Press; Niner, S. (2020). Veterans and Heroes: The Militarised Male Elite in Timor-Leste. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 21(2), 117-139.

<sup>27</sup> The issue of low levels of social trust specific to Lebanon is also discussed in Jirmanus et al. (2021). Confronting Structural Inequities (footnote 25).

## 6. Opportunities and potential sites for action

At the same time as naming barriers, the adolescents described several sites of agency and initiative, through which they could contribute to their communities and be part of meaningful larger endeavours.

Several participants work as volunteers in community programs, or have been part of collective action around human rights issues. One girl in Lebanon runs her own leadership program for young women, offering training sessions online (it was unclear whether this was her own initiative, or whether this was paid or unpaid work. The impression was that it was her own initiative). These past experiences, along with metaphors to do with trees, fruit, light, and ignition indicate a desire among adolescents to contribute to their communities and be part of initiatives that can help bring about positive changes. The following suggestions are drawn from ideas offered by adolescents in the songwriting workshops, or prompted by their stories of lack of voice.

### 6.1. Develop advocacy and education around the power of small, incremental acts.

Adolescents were inspired by the idea of the butterfly effect. They can be reminded about the power of a mosquito in a tent.<sup>28</sup> Part of collective power is being encouraged by others to think of small acts that you can do to bring about a small change in one space. Explore activities that look to create change through small incremental actions. The participants could be working as ‘action researchers’. This kind of participatory research follows cycles of Plan (discuss issues and think of action that could be taken); Act (put an agreed action in place); and Reflect (reconvene to discuss the action, what worked, what didn’t, what was learned). These reflections and discussions then lead directly to the next cycle of Plan-Act-Reflect.

Some girls in Za’atari had already had positive experiences of activism and being part of an advocacy campaign:

*We can make a campaign to create awareness about this issue of young people being undermined. (What is the reason for the problem?) One of the reasons is that they are afraid that the teens will take a wrong direction. Sometimes the girls are trying to leave their parents and just go away and live independently. In order to get away from the pressures placed on them by their families. So, the campaign could address this gap between how teenagers are treated in the community and how the adults are treated. By naming the problem, that is the first part of the campaign. (Girl, 14–17 years, Za’atari)*

Something like this could be gamified; for example, creating an app where participants sign up to a four-week ‘challenge’ (or other timeframe) and use the app to track their collective participation and progress. The app could send a daily prompt of a small, related action (initiating a conversation, writing down goals, supporting someone, etc.). Working via mobile technologies would help to ensure access for girls who are given little freedom of movement outside the home.

### 6.2. Training in ‘difficult conversations’ and non-violent conflict resolution

One group of girls identified that “conversations with our parents” were an important initial step to addressing the social norms that limit girls’ participation and potential. However, such conversations need to be approached carefully and strategically in order to avoid conflict.

*The solution in my opinion is to discuss this with my parents. I must convince them that I know [how to be safe and sensible]. (Girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon)*

Boys, on the other hand, spoke about the use of violence as a standard way of responding to an aggression; non-violent and dialogic ways of handling conflict seem to be less instinctive.

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<sup>28</sup> Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, is quoted as saying, “If you think you are too small to make a difference, try going to sleep in a tent with a mosquito in it.”

These experiences suggest there is a role for skills development and peer support around dialogue and difficult conversations, and for conscientisation around the way that power dynamics, social injustice, and norms of dominance are perpetuated when people do not challenge them. A collective action experience that is focused on negotiating access to something that parents currently do not allow could be a useful rehearsal space for a collective action that is focused on change in the wider community. These kinds of activities lend themselves well to other arts-based methods, such as Forum Theatre, role-play, and other methods that support adolescents to rehearse the difficult conversations that could help them develop their capabilities and realise their full potential.

### **6.3. Support critical thinking and education goals through ‘citizen journalism’**

Some participants in Lebanon expressed disappointment/disillusion with the available education system, describing it as stuck in the past and denying them the opportunity to critically engage with contemporary events and politics (with the suppression of discussion of the Beirut port explosion given as an example). They described a pedagogical approach that follows what Paolo Freire has called the ‘banking’ model of education, viewing learners as empty receptacles, into which information will be deposited. They called for greater access to critical education—report writing, research and investigation—that would enable them to engage critically with events and issues in their own context, and that affect them directly.

With this in mind, stakeholders could consider engaging older adolescents as citizen journalists, providing them with skills and platforms for critical engagement on contemporary issues. This would also provide them with valuable transferable skills, such as the ability to take accurate notes; to interview people; to communicate ideas; to document events using text, images, and recordings; and to analyse events and provide thoughtful commentary.

### **6.4. Promote activities using language around ‘thinking differently’ and non-conformity**

‘Thinking the same’ emerged as a recurring theme in the way adolescents expressed or described their valued relationships with others. “We think the same” was a reason given for having a strong voice in a relationship, while “thinking differently” was a reason that a relationship felt unsatisfactory.

*We share the same ideas. (Girl, Lebanon, 14–15)*

Many adolescents see themselves as ‘thinking differently’; this is something they take pride in and is an important part of their development as autonomous beings. Research in post-war Kosovo has shown a similar emphasis among young, music-interested people in valuing the opportunity to make friends, through activities, with “people who think the same as me.”<sup>29</sup>

This may, therefore, be a useful theme to include when marketing activities to adolescents. Rather than purely being focused on the skills that will be learned, adolescents may be attracted towards activities that are “for people who think differently” or who are seeking a chance “to create social change as part of a group of like-minded people.”

Also important might be the possibility of creating spaces of non-compliance, where social norms—such as the use of dominance over others, or those that restrict girls’ freedoms or do not name and condemn those who harass girls—can be resisted, and alternatives can be imagined and workshopped.

### **6.5. Create a team of social media ‘positive influencers’**

Many adolescents are engaged in social media, but this research suggests they do not always find it an effective space for their voice. This is partly because they measure the effectiveness of their voice by how many people it reaches (followers) and how many people respond positively (likes). In particular, the research indicated that many adolescents desire an audience that goes *beyond people who already know them*.

*Only those who know me give me ‘likes’ on social media. (Girl, 14–15 years, Lebanon)*

With this in mind, there may be value in running activities that help young people to create great content about the things they are passionate about (e.g., football, acrobatics) or that demonstrate their particular skills, and that support

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<sup>29</sup> <https://musicianswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/First-Of-All-Be-Friends-An-evaluation-of-Music-Connects-Howell-Bartleet-Davidson-and-Pope.pdf>

them to carve out a space as a positive social ‘influencer’. The aim would be to create a team of ‘positive influencers’ who make cool, edgy, appealing content that helps to promote key social messages to adolescents in the region.

Being an influencer has status in the online world. They could use training in digital creativities to create content, intended to be shared with audiences beyond their immediate circle. The data analytics attached to social media accounts could be a way to measure the effectiveness of the program.

This kind of initiative would need to be approached with care. There are personal risks associated with having prominence in social media and online spaces. There are also risks associated with government surveillance and authorities’ sensitivity to criticism. Therefore, a detailed risk assessment would be required at the outset, informed by young people’s insights and lived experiences; ongoing monitoring would also help to identify quickly any negative changes in audience response. The world of social media ‘influencing’ can change quickly, so having a steering committee comprised of adolescents that was able to implement changes nimbly would be an effective way to keep abreast of shifts in mood and taste.

## **6.6. Engage in further participatory research about experiences of trust and trusting in adolescent lives**

An important finding in this research has been the obstacle to voice and collective power posed by the absence of trust. This absence is at the individual level (where participants described their own inability to trust others) and the societal level (where participants described limited trust across their communities, such as the sense of lawlessness and impunity). Further research that seeks to better understand adolescent experiences of trust in settings of conflict, displacement, and instability could provide valuable insights into how trust intersects with the experience of being a refugee or living with extreme instability, and with adolescent development. What age group has the most likely allies for adolescents when engaging in collective action? Participatory arts-based research, as a democratic and relational approach to research is highly suitable for research that is oriented towards social change. Arts-based methodologies can be particularly effective in engaging with marginalised people and those whose voices are often silenced or overridden, as they are accessible and embrace multiple ways of knowing, including embodied and affective ways of knowing and communicating. Involving the adolescents in defining the problem, in meaning-making and drawing conclusions, would ensure their stories are centred, and their meaning-making would bring nuanced insights to the challenge of overcoming their mistrust and help identify practical strategies for increasing their collective participation.

## **6.7. Support parents, caregivers, schools, and other institutions to create space for adolescent voices**

Many of the factors that work to inhibit adolescent voices are to do with parents, caregivers, teachers, school leaders, and other institutional actors. Stakeholders should look for opportunities to build greater understanding of adolescents’ potential to contribute to their communities beyond pre-defined and limiting roles (e.g., daily wage labour, household responsibilities). Ensure positive parenting education includes engagement with the specific developmental needs of adolescents. Identify the patterns of dominance and dismissal that many adolescents identified as effectively silencing them and that leave them feeling isolated. Explore ways to engage school leaders and teachers with rights-based discourses that recognise adolescents’ rights within children’s rights, while also urging for greater inclusion of critical education options that recognises adolescents’ capacity and desire to engage critically with current events and social challenges.

## 7. Reflections on songwriting as research method

### 7.1. Working creatively with language

These workshops used metaphor as a safe and powerful way to express difficult stories, experiences, and emotions. However, for some of the groups, particularly the boys, thinking metaphorically was a new concept, and unfamiliar.

Thinking and speaking metaphorically is a powerful tool for expression and communication, but it can take practice to get the symbols flowing. Ameen described it as

*... this hidden language that we can use. Think about the hand-sign that means 'violence at home' that we have seen on TikTok. We can do this with words as well. You can't reveal your secrets to other people. So, you use a symbol. (Ameen Mokdad, debrief 9)*

Ameen found it was important to offer examples—"a turned-off TV; what do you think this might mean?"—and to help participants unpack the metaphors they thought of. Sometimes, as they talked about their metaphors, they refined or amended them further, resulting in an even more coherent and apt use of metaphor.

### 7.2. Creating a meaningful artwork together

The songwriting process was highly collaborative. Decisions were made together; every word or line needed to be agreed by the group. As a result, the participants felt a strong sense of ownership over their song. The indicators of this were in the way they corrected Ameen if they felt he had misrepresented their words or intentions as the lyrics took shape. They took great care, and had great clarity in what they intended to say. The words mattered to them, indicating that they believed in the authenticity of this creative process.

Their ownership was reinforced at the end of the workshop, when they were asked to formally give consent for their song to be shared with other songwriters taking part in the research, and for Save the Children and the University of Melbourne to be able to share their song when talking with others about the research. The experience of creating an artwork together, and having their ownership acknowledged, was an empowering experience.

### 7.3. Emotional catharsis through music

We should not underestimate the potential for musical sounds to cause a *shift* or a *quickening* in listeners that may be unexpected. Research has shown that shared musical experiences can have a cathartic effect on individuals, creating a swell of emotion that can come quite unexpectedly. In one of the boys' workshops, when Ameen first began to play the violin, another workshop staff member noticed that one of the boys looked suddenly moved to tears, as if he was about to cry. The music was able to penetrate the armour of toughness he had built up, allowing him to see for a moment the pressures with which he contended on a daily basis. The staff member then felt a corresponding wave of emotion.

### 7.4. Expressing complex and uncomfortable concepts in safe ways

The songwriting process flowed directly from the metaphors that the participants chose as they discussed their experiences of voice in the five social dimensions of the ecological model for adolescent voice. The metaphors proved to be an incredibly powerful communication tool, able to capture and convey complex information about the participant's experience in poignant and playful ways. The resulting songs engaged with fantasy, story, and vivid imagery, and together these allowed the young people to communicate what were often quite difficult, traumatic, or disempowered experiences with a degree of psychological and emotional distance from the subject matter.

While it is not possible to know in what ways the ideas expressed in the discussions and song lyrics in these workshops differed from what the same participants might have offered in a more conventional focus group discussion, there is a richness of imagery in the song lyrics that captured the many tensions in the adolescent experience of voice in their communities. This research confirmed that collective songwriting, like other forms of participatory arts-based research, could provide multiple concurrent registers for communication, making it inclusive and accessible. The use of metaphor to capture the essence of adolescents' lived experiences helped to deepen and extend the participants' and the researchers' understanding of more complex or abstract experiences.

## 7.5. Effect of having a male facilitator

When planning the workshops, we (the principal investigator and the Save the Children research manager) recognised the importance of having a female co-facilitator. However, the workshop experience has also indicated the value of adolescents working with a male facilitator who was patient and kind, who showed leadership without the need for control, and who provided a different male role model than what most adolescents were used to.

In Za'atari, workshop facilitator Ameen Mokdad had the impression that it was uncommon for a man to talk with the boys in a gentle and unassuming way.

*Usually when I work with this age group, I don't look them in the eyes. Because I sense they are accustomed to using eye contact as a way of asserting dominance over another, especially with a new man. So, I take a long time, to slowly build their trust.  
(Ameen Mokdad, workshop facilitator)*

The boys in general appeared tough and aggressive, but as they began to lower their defences and started to reveal something of themselves in the workshops, their innocence and vulnerability came to the fore. While this observation arose in the Jordan workshops, it may be applicable across Middle Eastern society more broadly, where boys are often required (and incentivised) to grow up quickly, and to adopt mannerisms and behaviours beyond their actual age. They, therefore, miss the chance to develop more holistically, with opportunities to engage with and learn from their emotions and feelings. Ameen felt their youthful, sometimes childlike responses in the songwriting workshops was an indication that those aspects of their lives and minds had had a constrained development, due to social norms that require adolescents to adopt the norms of adulthood as quickly as possible.

## 7.6. Staff development

Staff development was an important part of this research project. The goal was that Save the Children local staff would gain skills and confidence in songwriting facilitation, and new ideas and knowledge for conducting participatory research. In addition, it was hoped that they would find the creative process meaningful and beneficial for themselves, as their work is often stressful and demanding. Also, many local staff have been exposed to the same traumas and stresses that affect their young clients.

To this end, staff were invited to take part in **8 hours of online training** with the principal investigator (giving an overview of the research approach and preparing them for their role as note-takers), and a **4-5 hour refresher face-to-face training** with the workshop facilitator Ameen Mokdad. The refresher training took place the day before the adolescents' workshops began in each country, and it followed the same workshop process that was used with the adolescents, using brainstorming, questioning, and prompts to explore their experiences of having a voice or being voiceless or unheard, and working collectively to turn these ideas into a song.

The workshop staff then took an active role in the adolescent songwriting workshops, supporting the adolescents, offering ideas, liaising with partner organisation staff, documenting registrations and consents, and helping to ensure the 'flow' and consistent energy of the workshop environment. At the end of the workshop, they spent a further one to two hours working collectively to collate all the stories and words spoken in the workshop, and helped to translate these into English to be analysed.

In daily debriefs, Ameen (workshop facilitator) and Gillian (principal investigator) observed that realisation of the local staff development goals depended on the Country Office capacity to make staff available and involve all adult participants in the training. The best outcomes for staff—in terms of having a meaningful, moving experience for themselves as well as the participants—occurred where:

- Local staff (country office and field staff) engaged actively and enthusiastically with the online training; e.g., asking questions, volunteering responses to the interactive activities, and reflecting on this information once the adolescents' workshops began;
- Local CO staff, field staff, and any partner organisation staff were part of the refresher training;

- All staff worked cooperatively and consistently with the facilitator to create a safe and private space for the workshops, free of interruptions caused by mobile phones, side conversations, or movement of people in and out of the workshop space;
- Field staff and partner organisation staff supported the workshop timeframe and workshop content (collective creativity focused on giving adolescents opportunities to speak freely and candidly about their experiences), and encouraged the young people to stay for the full length of the workshop;
- The workshop team was able to stay in the workshop space after the adolescents had departed in order to collate all their recollections of the workshop while the memories were most fresh; and
- All participating staff (country office and partner organisation) believed in the research approach and the importance of the adolescents' voices. (When this didn't happen, as was the case in Jordan, staff behaved in ways that undermined the workshop process and the data gathering methods; e.g., suggesting to Ameen that he ask fewer questions of the adolescents, so that the workshop could finish earlier; attempting to change the adolescents' chosen words for less provocative or incendiary words, thus prioritising the status quo over the adolescents' experiences).

In each of the three countries, staff wrote songs of their own, either in the refresher training workshop, or in response to the adolescents' workshops. The creation of these songs—four in total—is a good indicator of staff engagement with the creative process and its positive impact on them.

During the staff refresher training sessions, staff were invited to reflect on their own experiences of voice. Several shared the realities of their work, where they could often feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenges their young charges faced. It became clear that some have learned to disengage from the young people's lived experiences, as a self-protection mechanism. One spoke candidly of her sense of hopelessness: "I know I'm making some positive change, but it's not enough."

When local staff embraced their supportive role, they had opportunities to bring their own creativity and musicality to the fore in highly productive and appreciated ways. For example, in one of the East Amman groups, it took some time for creative momentum to begin to flow. A staff member helped to role-model how to make contributions, giving the adolescents the confidence to try:

*[Staff member in Jordan] gave some really good suggestions, and the group praised her, saying "Yeah, she is a natural rapper!" She was surprised. And very happy and shocked at herself. Everyone could see she was feeling the flow. She had the rhythm inside her. (Ameen Mokdad, workshop facilitator).*

In Lebanon in particular, the local staff seemed transformed by their experiences in the songwriting workshops. By the third workshop, the staff had begun writing their own songs in response to the participants' stories and words. For example, the excerpt below is from a song created by Jana Youssef, included here with her permission:

**Held liable on my own,  
Walking cautiously  
In a huge wood  
With blurring eyes.  
They say that woods are loud:  
Water, owls and trees,  
Loud voices  
And lights slamming pebbles.**

**Held liable on my own**

Walking cautiously  
In a huge wood  
With blurring eyes.  
I stand,  
Counting my bones  
For they are breaking  
And weapons aching.  
No owls, no trees.  
(By Jana Youssef, Lebanon CO)

### 7.7. Relinquishing adult control

The debriefs indicated that the greatest challenges in some contexts came from some staff's reluctance to truly relinquish adult control over the workshop space and allow it to be a space where adolescent voices, experiences, and concerns had precedence. While the workshop goals around foregrounding adolescent voices were fully articulated, and there were actions that supported the realisation of these, there were concurrently a raft of subtle (and sometimes overt) ways that adult authority was reasserted over the workshop facilitator and participants. In general, this was in the form of disruptions. Disruptions were created by calling participants out of the workshop at random times, always with a sense of urgency and authority; continuing to use mobile phones during the workshop (answering calls, making calls, holding conversations in the workshop room; talking with other adults or initiating conversations and 'side-talk' with participants).

It was heartening to see some adolescents push back against these disruptions (for example, through insisting that they be allowed to stay until the end of the workshop, in order to complete their work on the songwriting and recording, and speaking to their parents on the phone to explain this). While it is understandable that situations may arise that require flexibility from everyone, adult-led interruptions nevertheless highlight how adult infringements of the established workshop rules and goals can function as a form of asserting control over young people's space. It gives pause to reflect on how many spaces adolescents may be able to access that are not constantly subject to adult controls, and how important this access is for their experience of having a voice and claiming their rights to speak and be heard. It raised the possibility that some adults might not want the adolescents to use their voices and claim their rights in case these somehow usurped the adults' authority. In this way, the social hierarchies that the adolescents described as constraining their voices in various social contexts also imposed some influence in the songwriting workshops for this research.

Arts-based workshops can be strategised as an opportunity to carve out these kinds of non-hierarchical spaces. In contexts where there are few opportunities and resources for artistic engagement, there are likely to be many hidden talents and capacities among a group of adolescents and adults. There is, therefore, great potential for creating an egalitarian and democratic space in which **authority and influence comes in the form of ideas and participation**, rather than social position. I suggest that arts-led processes offer all participants the opportunity to create an *exceptional space*<sup>30</sup> in which the usual rules of operation can be suspended, in which thinking like an artist (questioning things, offering challenges and provocations, seeing a situation from different angles and perspectives) is a norm that is valued and protected by everyone in the room.

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<sup>30</sup> Nunn, C. (2020). The participatory arts-based research project as an exceptional sphere of belonging. *Qualitative Research*, 22(2), 251-268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120980971>

## 8. Conclusions

This arts-based research sought to answer the following three questions:

- How do adolescent girls and boys affected by conflict and violence in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan experience 'voice' and collective power?
- What are the barriers (such as power structures, social and gender norms) that limit the agency of adolescents? In particular, how does the experience of violence influence voice, activism, and engagement with power structures?
- What are the opportunities for nurturing greater civic engagement, voice, and agency among adolescents affected by conflict and violence in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan, and in Save the Children's adolescent programs across the Middle East more broadly?

Overall, adolescents find the space for their voices to be very constrained. For some, particularly girls, even their friendship groups offer only limited vocal space. They experience voice in various forms of voicelessness, conditionality, and temporality.

The overriding barriers to adolescents having a strong voice in all of the social spaces they inhabit are social norms. These have evolved in response to the current conditions of displacement, insecurity and extreme hardship to privilege power and hierarchy. In all three countries, and across the five social dimensions of the socio-ecological model, it was found that having a strong voice was connected to being higher in the social hierarchy (within the family, the school, the community, etc.), while weak voices were associated with being low in the social hierarchy. Adolescents typically occupy a lower position, as they do not yet have the privileges of adulthood and are still under their parents' care, yet they are often expected to carry adult-like responsibilities in the family, such as contributing to family income or providing care for younger siblings. Experiences of voice varied across the social dimensions according to individual resources, so that being good at your work, or being a valued member of a sports team, could give you a stronger voice in that setting. Gender norms, as a subset of social norms, further regulate and limit the vocal space for girls, with that space contracting as they get older.

The research into adolescent experiences of voice and collective power has yielded three clear messages:

- Adolescents want to speak. They have huge voices and are confident in their potential to use these in ways that will benefit their communities, but they find that repeatedly, and across all the social dimensions of their social worlds, they feel silenced and even voiceless. They see themselves as **Silent Lions**.
- They want to be listened to, in their families, among their friends and team-mates, in the schools, and in the community. They want to be able to reach the end of their sentences. They feel that their voices are so disregarded, that even when they carve out the space in which to speak, others are not really listening. **"Just listen!"** is their frustrated cry.
- Adolescents value their autonomy. They want to be able to stretch their (metaphoric) wings and learn to fly, even if that means they will make mistakes and sometimes fall. But they also know they can't build the lives they desire entirely alone. All they hope for is **just a little bit of help**, in the form of encouragement, some structures, some trust, and some unconditional love.

Opportunities for nurturing greater civic engagement and participation, towards collective power, do exist. Adolescents expressed desire for critical education and skills that could help them amplify their voices and reach wider audiences. Remaining within their communities is important to them—they want to feel like they belong and are valued—and there is great potential to harness social media as a space for adolescent engagement, collective action, and amplification of their voices in contemporary, edgy, and safe ways.

## Acknowledgments

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### **Workshop Facilitator, data collection lead, and co-songwriter with the adolescents—Mr Ameen Mokdad**

*Mr Ameen Mokdad is a musician, poet, and composer, music educator and music therapist who has worked with Baghdad contemporary arts organisation Bait TARKIB, Turkey-based social circus program Sirkhane, and its music branch, Müzikhane. He founded the Light Orchestra, a musical-social project in Mosul, Iraq, in 2019, and is a close collaborator of the US-based intercultural music organization Cuatro Puntos. As a music facilitator, he works creatively and therapeutically with participants across multiple artforms to bring their stories and experiences into musical and poetic form.*

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