

In Their Own Words: Female Adolescent Empowerment Through Participation in Participatory Action Research for Sexual Health: A Qualitative Meta-Synthesis of YPAR Empowerment Outcomes

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Abstract

A qualitative meta-synthesis of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) on sexual health foregrounds how female adolescents voice and enact their empowerment by their participation. Through the synthesis of six studies, seven themes emerged. The female voices showed a progression of agency beginning with an increased self-awareness and altered lived experiences to supporting, educating others, a keener awareness of others' experiences, and speaking up or against in-accurate information or authoritarian policies. Female adolescents have the right to be heard, articulate their opinions, the right to practice their culture, and ultimately, the right to influence the constraints on their personal and sexual health development.

Keywords: Adolescence; female voice; YPAR; empowerment outcomes
Subject classification codes: Sexual Health; Youth Development; Rights of youth

Young women need comprehensive sexual health education [1] because female adolescence is a stage of development where physical, including sexual, cognitive, emotional, and social issues are furiously evolving [2]. Young women, those aged 12 to their early 20s, are attempting to understand their bodies, their identities, and their places in the social world, including the sexual arena, while experiencing the push of social norms to conform to dominant constructions of femininity [2]. Females have different experiences around their sexuality compared to males and places them in a unique social position [3]. As well as social norms, the sexual health of young women is constrained by the regulations in the places where they live and study. For example, 44 countries have laws requiring a parent or spouse to consent for the female's contraceptive services [4]. Therefore, personal, social, and regulatory issues all must be addressed in sexual health education for adolescent females.

Research on the effectiveness of sexual health education programs is often a top-down approach, based on the evaluation of educators or population metrics such as pregnancy rates. Yet what do young women themselves say is important to their sexual health? One research method that foregrounds the voices of the participants is action research.

Action research involves the population of interest in a democratic process of inquiry to develop practical knowledge for promoting

individual and collective flourishing [5]. Participatory action research with youth (YPAR), a type of action research, promotes self-reliance and empowerment through solving practical problems to achieve social transformation [6]. Empowerment of both individuals and groups is an intended outcome of YPAR. Empowerment is a progression of knowledge and an improved understanding of one's own interests and priorities [5]. The process of empowerment for individuals is a developmental progression whereby the ability to challenge, negotiate, and act on the root causes of personally relevant issues, can be present on multiple levels in various circumstances, and this ability slowly improves over time [7-9]. YPAR serves to develop new knowledge and skills, deconstructs the power differentials between adults and youth, facilitates the development of agency and leadership qualities, and enables the potential for youth to act on issues related to their oppression [10, 11]. Given the marginalization, vulnerability, and racialization of many young women, particularly those of colour, in all income levels of every country (Austin, 2018), YPAR is a good method for sexual health research because it is particularly effective for working with underserved, marginalized, or racialized youth [6, 8]. In YPAR, the aim is to have the young women develop a progression of their agency by 'finding their voice' and enhancing their social capital through interaction and development of relationships with peers and adults in a collaborative and caring environment [3, 12].

The outcomes reported in YPAR projects have been tabulated in three recent systematic reviews. For YPAR projects in general, Shamrova and Cummings (2017) classified five outcomes in 45 studies: increasing awareness of social justice, taking leadership

roles, enhanced relationships with adults, developing a sense of belonging to community, and becoming change agents [13]. Anyon, Bender, Kennedy, and Dechast (2018) examined YPAR outcomes in 52 studies, finding the most commonly reported outcomes were related to agency and leadership (75.0%), followed by academic or career (55.8%), social (36.5%), interpersonal (34.6%), and cognitive (23.1%), but none of the studies reported emotional outcomes [10]. One review by Villa-Torres and Svanemyr (2015) identifies successful YPAR outcomes for sexual health as skill building, power-sharing, and group work to develop curricula and interventions, community partnerships, and youth leadership in projects [14].

What is not clear, however, whether these are also the outcomes that youth experience. The outcomes reported in these studies reflect the researchers' own pre-conceived lens of empowerment [13, 15], or lack discussions of empowerment outcomes altogether [16, 17]. YPAR studies discuss the research topic and not necessarily lived experiential empowerment outcomes [18]. Caraballo et al., (2017), for example, state that they relied solely on researcher reports of transformative outcomes in their critical review of YPAR and education research [8]. The result is that we know about the outcomes valued by the researchers, but not necessarily those experienced by the youth themselves.

Even more critically, there has been a failure of these reviewers to examine outcomes specifically by gender. Many YPAR projects on sexual health do not differentiate female and male voices (see our literature search results). This lack of gender-based analysis is a key issue because female and male youth have different experiences and concerns around their sexuality. Early female adolescents experience a 'loss of voice' and their self-image declines at the early-adolescent stage of physical development, as well as being constrained by social norms [3] while adolescent males experience an increase in self-image at this crossroad of physical development [2]. Therefore, young women will experience empowerment or lack of empowerment in different domains than young men when it comes to their sexual health.

Due to the reporting of researcher-defined outcomes and the lack of gender-based analysis, we do not have an accurate picture of what outcomes young women have experienced through their participation in YPAR projects on sexual health education. What do the young women themselves say they have experienced? Given the centrality of participant defined goals in YPAR, we have gathered the words of female adolescents reported in a set of qualitative YPAR sexuality studies to provide an authentic understanding of the empowerment outcomes they obtained.

Methods

To understand the empowerment outcomes of young women in YPAR projects on sexual health, we have conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis of their voices. A qualitative meta-synthesis (QMS) is a systematic review methodology that requires the authors to interpret qualitative data through themes or metaphors to produce a grounded description of a phenomena. The QMS process is inductive, integrative, and expansionistic, in contrast to a traditional systematic review or meta-summary, which is reductionistic [19, 20]. The method was selected for this review because it provides a way to highlight participant preferences and values, and focuses on the lived experience of the study participants [20]. Additionally, QMS is particularly suited to addressing research questions on the

effectiveness of interventions [20], so this methodology facilitates our understanding of the outcomes of YPAR as reported by the young women themselves.

A QMS search is conducted with purposeful sampling or the selection of studies with 'exemplary information' [19]. Our review was based on studies with a minimum amount of primary data—six or greater primary quotes—from the female adolescents. The narrative raw data (the quotes in this review) were analyzed and interpreted into a whole while remaining grounded in the original data [20]. The analysis was conducted by coding the primary data (quotes) with concepts or categories through 'constant comparative analysis' [21].

These concepts were compared across studies with 'reciprocal translation,' a technique that creates 'rubric[s] for salient categories of meaning' [19, 22]. Similar concepts were then synthesized into an overall conceptualization [20]. The strength of this synthesis technique is that is that 'particularities are retained, and the reconstruction enhances the complexity' [23]. This was critical for our review as every young woman's voice must be heard, and no narratives are suppressed by being 'smoothed over' or rather, re-interpreted through the researcher's frame of reference.

The search was conducted on May 16, 2018 with the following parameters:

Keywords: 'participatory action research', 'YPAR', and 'youth empowerment' and the publications that were chosen ranged between 2005–2018 to represent a generational timeframe. The publications included those in any language, peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, books and book chapters, and grey literature. Publications excluded consisted of conference abstracts, protocols, and master's level theses. Nine databases were searched: Academic Search Complete, CINAHL, Google Scholar, PsyArticles, PubMed, Science Direct, Social Science Abstracts and Full Text, Teacher Reference Center, and Womens' Studies International. In addition, six journals were hand-searched with the keyword 'participatory action:' *Advances in Child Development and Behavior, Educational Action Research, Journal of Adolescent Health, Qualitative Psychology, Reproductive Health Matters, and Sex Education.*

Retrievals from the keyword searches were title and abstract sorted into publication categories such as journal articles, dissertations, reviews and books. Inclusion criteria included studies of YPAR projects within any settings or location for projects conducted in whole or in part on sexual health. Exclusions included projects where theory and methods were not conducted with PAR. Although no language exclusions were applied, all retrievals were in English. Full text articles included after title and abstract sorting were citation chased in Google Scholar. The retrieved articles from citation chasing were sorted by title and abstract as above.

The search produced 22 publications for paper review. The inclusion criterion was the publication of a minimum of six quotes identified as female comments on their experiences with YPAR. The studies that were excluded are listed in 'supplemental file one.'

Two additional searches for data (quotes) was undertaken. CH contacted by email the corresponding authors of the included studies and the studies not identifying participant quotes by gender to inquire about the availability of data. One author provided her dissertation; otherwise no additional data was available. A second grey literature

search sought quotes from the included YPAR studies by searching for their project titles in Google on July 3, 2018. From this search of project reports, no female identified quotes were located.

Based on the available data, six studies were selected for the meta-synthesis (described in Findings). For a QMS, an assessment of study quality is not conducted (Tricco, 2016) – the data is accepted at face value [20]. Nevertheless, the reviewers were vigilant for potential biases in the research. Where reported, the comments from the youth were not collected by those in a fiduciary role, and no projects were funded by religious organizations. Four of the studies included participants as co-authors, and two studies conducted member-checks of the analysis. By observation, no evidence of substantial bias in the participant interviews was noted in the selected studies.

Data extractions were performed with a piloted template (2 studies). The initial data extraction categories were: project title; brief description of project; dates conducted; study N and participant demographics; study location; study setting; project funder(s), partners, and stakeholders; participant quotes; and researcher reports of participant voices. Both reviewers conducted the data extractions independently and then compared results following completion of this process; no discrepancies were recorded. Over the course of the data extraction, we found that many studies lacked information for several of these areas. Data on researcher reports of the comments by young women were dropped because they were in almost every case a discussion of a quote already cited in the study. Quotes were checked for accuracy against the published text before conducting the analysis.

The analysis was conducted by both reviewers working side-by-side. Each of the 80 quotes was given a brief concept label, composed whenever possible with the young woman's actual words. These labels were further refined through constant comparative analysis and our discussions as each quote (data) was categorized.

The synthesis was constructed with reciprocal translation. 'Translation focuses on seeking a common rubric for salient categories of meaning' [22]. The quotes (labels) were combined into groups based on larger conceptual categories, a process referred to as 'piling' by Toyé et al. (2014) [21]. These conceptual categories were then linked into an overall narrative description by comparing categories across studies and the relationships between the categories [20]. Our synthesis had an initial inter-coder reliability of 97%, with three discrepancies resolved through discussion.

The results of this review are designed to provide a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the empowerment outcomes for young women participating in YPAR projects on sexual health. Our findings are reported in the next section.

Findings

The review is based on six included studies. In five studies the participants were 15 to 24 years old; one study was of 6th graders aged 12. Three of the studies reported on participation by GLBTQ youth, with two studies acknowledging their participation, and one questioning the apparent lack of their presence in their project. The studies addressed several vulnerable populations: children with disabilities, Indigenous youth, African-American female adolescents, and youth living in low income communities. As for the projects,

five were mixed gender programs, and one exclusively female. Four of the projects were conducted in an educational setting, and two were community-based. A brief overview of each study follows below.

The Chappell study focussed on a South Africa YPAR on sexuality education for 22 Zulu youth with disabilities aged 15-20 years old [24]. Two participants were co-authors. Data was collected from discussions from mixed and single sex groups, and individual interviews. With qualitative content analysis, the study authors identified three themes: 'shifting adult-youth relationships, negotiated meanings and the co-construction of knowledge, and identity work and dialogic space' (p. 2).

Coll, O'Sullivan, and Enright (2018), and Coll (dissertation, 2016). Coll's project is a qualitative study that took place in Ireland over 18 months and included 43 student co-researchers (ages 15-17) that attended a Protestant fee-paying school [25]. The purpose of the study was to determine what content students want in their sex education. Data was gathered from focus-group discussions, concept mapping, and large group discussions. Through thematic analysis, the researchers found that the students desired a curriculum based on relevance, inclusion, and comfort.

Evans-Winters YPAR was a qualitative study that specifically included 'black girls and girls of color' (no report of the number in the project) in a New York public high school [26]. The article was co-authored with the Girls for Gender Equity, and the lead author strongly identifies as a 'Black girl/woman/mother/ scholar activist' (p. 417). The goal of the program was to highlight 'how girls cope with sexist school environments' (p. 416). The study exposed a school environment marked by harsh discipline, and the stigmatization of the female adolescents by school personnel as 'dangerous bodies.' The young women advocated to change these conditions by exposing the inequitable treatment, telling their stories (unscripting), and presenting their research (rewriting).

McLaughlin et al. report on a three year YPAR for AIDS education curriculum development with 144 students in the 6th grade, averaging 12 years of age, in three primary schools in Kenya, three in Ghana, and two in Swaziland (some locations a low income community, a mix of Christian and Muslim) [27]. The last author was a participant. The goal of the project was curriculum development for changing attitudes and cultural norms. Each school housed a curriculum development group composed of two female and two male pupils, a teacher, two community members (one male, one female), and a resource person. Data was collected through observations of group meetings, pupil focus groups, and semi-structured individual interviews. Through textual analysis, the authors document the development of pupil leadership, activism, and peer support. Their findings and synthesis focus on dialogues and talking back.

Monchalin et al.'s article reflects on a YPAR on HIV prevention and youth leadership, Taking Action II, a three year project with over 100 Indigenous youth in six communities in Canada [28]. The Native Youth Sexual Health Network is a co-author, and the first author identifies as Indigenous heritage. This study was based on the experiences of 18 youth leaders (16-24 years old, 7 male and 11 female) who created a three to five minute digital story as part of the program. The analysis was based on the stories and two sets of individual semi-structured interviews. Thematic coding was

performed on leadership topics, followed by inductive thematic analysis that was member-checked. The themes are characteristics of a leader, leadership challenges, and demonstrating leadership.

Nicholas (2017) published a PhD dissertation highlighting the experiences of 6 former participants who had participated in a program called ‘Teen Advocates for Sexual Health,’ a rights based program [29]. The 30-40 students in the primary study were from a low-income neighbourhood in St. Louis Missouri. The six former students included one male, one gender not disclosed, two cis-gender females [term not defined], and one black female). The research goal was to explore the participants’ advocacy experiences and empowerment outcomes from the program which featured 9-12 weekly discussions on peer advocacy, school sexual education, and civic engagement including lobbying. The data was drawn from 25 in-depth interviews, 30-90 minutes each. The analysis was conducted with coding by constant comparison for the identification of themes; it was member checked. The themes were described as *head* (knowledge), *heart* (emotional and psychological well-being), and *feet* (peer education and support).

Our analysis defined 26 labels (experiences) in the 80 quotes, and seven synthesis categories. The experiences are reported by synthesis category and presented with quote examples below. The count of quotes by synthesis categories and study is tabulated in Table 1 following.

(1) Self-Awareness: personal strength, awareness of abilities, personal growth, self-care, identity.

I guess it's the strength in me and I didn't know that I had so much strength, now I know that I am much tougher than I thought (Chappell).

The more practice you get thinking about it you get the hang of it better (Coll).

(2) Altered lived experience: program changed me, positive identity, no irrational fears (of HIV), role model, sense of purpose, ‘life-saving,’ making decisions and developing new skills.

While I was presenting, I felt like all of my struggles had finally meant something. I wasn't just a statistic anymore of someone who

had been a victim of the system (Evans-Winters).

Meant me getting to have a very different relationship with my body and sexuality than I would've gotten to have without it...life-saving (Nichols).

(3) Awareness of others: *It really, really hurts because I know so many young people who are trying the best that they can and people look at them and it's just so easy to look down on them when they don't know the struggles (Monchalin).*

(4) Speaking up: to adults, to teachers/school staff, to peers, lost fear of being laughed at, pushing back.

I felt confident talking in front of them and that they wouldn't laugh at me (Coll).

If there's a point that teacher did not teach well, we correct it and we also try to correct other pupils too (McLaughlin).

(5) Educate/Support peers: *I saw first-hand how powerful it was just to give people correct information, just that, in and of itself is such an empowering tool (Nicholas).*

If I can help somebody grow or help them find an opportunity or to even be there just to have a conversation (Monchalin).

(6) Community/Political activism: change agent, create supportive community, leadership skills, help community, address problems, educate adults.

I really try to spend most of my time trying to like mobilize community, my poor community has had to deal with so many events (Monchalin).

Very like tangibly advocating for change of a policy and systems level, and using the knowledge you have about how policy impacts people to try and change it (Nicholas).

(7) YPAR experiences lead to career direction.

I knew that, how different my life was when I didn't have any understanding, and didn't feel control over my own reproduction and what it felt like when I did have that, so I mean that led me to be a health social work major (Nicholas).

Table 1: Synthesis count of experiences by study

Category	Chappell	Coll	Evans-Winters	McLaughlin	Monchalin	Nicholas	Total
Self-awareness	1	3	4	1	3	4	16
Altered lived experience	4	0	1	1	3	9	18
Awareness of others	0	0	1	0	1	1	3
Speaking up	0	3	2	4	1	4	14
Educate/ support peers	0	0	3	3	2	2	10
Activism	1	0	3	1	5	5	15
Career	0	0	0	0	0	4	4
Total	6	6	14	10	15	29	80

Discussion

Progression of Empowerment

The synthesis categories suggest a model of the progression of empowerment for young women from their participation in YPAR for sexual health. This progression occurs in the three contexts, and Peterson (2010) suggests that the development of empowerment happens over time [9]. At the personal level, the young women spoke about experiences of changes in their self-awareness and how their lived experience was different than before. In the social world, they talked about their newfound awareness of others' experiences, and their ability to speak up about important issues. In the community, they translated these experiences into concrete behaviours: educating and supporting peers, becoming activists, and some changing their career path. This empowerment trajectory is consistent with the goals of YPAR: to develop new knowledge and skills, deconstruct the power differentials between adults and youth, facilitate the development of agency and leadership qualities, and enable the potential to act on issues related to their oppression [10, 11].

Cross-Study and Sub-Group Comparisons of Programs and Participants

The empowerment outcomes as experienced by the young women themselves is very similar across studies. This is a particularly salient finding considering the differing study locations, program participant mix, and the age of the adolescent participants.

The reach of the locations where the YPAR research was conducted is noteworthy, encompassing four African countries, one European, and two North American. The localities of the studies represented include urban and rural, low income neighbourhoods, and differing religious cultures. This makes the homogeneity of the empowerment outcomes even more remarkable. It appears that YPAR processes are similar across contexts.

Only one of the six programs was female specific; in the mixed gender studies it is not known if the results would have been different due to the presence of males. The reality of large school class rooms can hinder young women from freely expressing themselves and limit the inclusion of gender equality education [30]. Nonetheless the young women's' experiences of empowerment were similar for the participants in both mixed gender and female specific projects. The sample size is too small to reach a conclusion on the relative effectiveness of mixed vs. female only YPAR programs for young women.

Two of the studies were inclusive of LGBTQ participants, although, for purposes of our study, only participants identified as female were included. There are insufficient quotes available for a sub-group analysis. A lack of LGBTQ participants was observed by the researchers in the Canadian Indigenous YPAR, reporting that 'the voices of two-spirit youth were absent in our sample [18 youth]' [28]. This is a significant omission as two-spirited youth are more likely than their heterosexual peers to have depression and anxiety, attempt suicide, run away or be 'kicked out' of their homes, drop out of school, or abuse drugs and alcohol [31]. This and other YPAR projects will fall short of their health promotion goals when LGBTQ youth are not recruited and included.

One YPAR study was conducted with youth with disabilities, a population rarely included in YPAR (Chappell). The six female adolescent quotes reflected ideas about self-awareness, altered lived

experience, and activism. Chappell notes that the outcomes for their participants paralleled those of youth without disabilities in developing countries. There are insufficient quotes to perform a sub-group analysis for this review.

Finally, five of the six studies in this review had participants who were middle to older adolescents, and only one YPAR included only 12 year old pupils. Regardless of their age group, the participants reported very similar experiences. Nevertheless, YPAR with middle school females is considered more integral to their development, due to their fast evolving intellectual and psychological growth, waning motivation and engagement, and the need for increased decision-making and control [32]. Because of their particular needs, we need to hear the voices of the younger adolescent females to ascertain if YPAR is achieving its goals for this population.

These cross-study comparisons highlight homogeneity of experiences across locations, cultures, and diverse populations with five of the six of the studies showing alterations in their self-awareness, lived experiences, speaking up, and some form of community or political activism.

YPAR and Voice

Speaking up and developing voice, albeit reported mostly through researchers' summaries, are a major strength of YPAR outcomes [5, 33, 34]. McLaughlin explores the importance of talking back, being listened to, and becoming better able to speak up about sexuality - 'gaining voice' - as important elements in the progression of empowerment. All of the researchers wrote about their dedication to the philosophy of YPAR with its respectful discussion and listening to differing views, a willingness to be vulnerable, and the creation of 'participatory spaces' enabling expansion of the self across contexts. The YPAR process of discussion and listening contributed to the young women speaking up (Chappell; Coll; & McLaughlin), and the inclusion of external community resource adults and more time to engage with them contributed to their ability to 'talking back' (McLaughlin).

Yet how far do the voices of the young women carry? Bay-Cheng and Lewis (2006) contend that a central paradox of empowerment is that power differences (in our review, adult-adolescent) can promote the concept that one person can bestow power (voice) to another [35]. Unfortunately, power differences were observed in one YPAR study - interestingly, the project with 12 year old pupils. McLaughlin reports that in Ghana, high status teachers and community members 'tended to silence pupils' inputs' (p. 211). Fortunately, two of the research teams purposefully disrupted the belief that the researchers can take credit for bestowing voice. Chappell focuses on voice, but not that the researchers 'give voice,' but that the participants 'exercise their own voices' (p. 5). Evans-Winters concurs, because 'black girl power' lies within them, requiring advocacy and support activities to 'bring forth their power' (p. 422). The young women in the projects of Coll and McLaughlin emphasized that both their voices and those of the adult researchers and teachers were included in decision-making.

Review Limitations and Contribution

The major limitations of this review come from the nature of the data (quotes). No transcripts were available when we made inquiries to the corresponding authors, so the data is not comprehensive of the complete interviews. Therefore, the quotes selected by the

researchers for their articles may not be representative. Chappell et al. do not include quotes on speaking up, yet they observe ‘oppositional identities that speak back’ (p. 7). Monchalín et al. note that several participants had made career choices based on their participation, but do not include any quotes. The research question almost certainly influenced the selection of quotes with the McLaughlin article focused on ‘talking back’ and Monchalín project on leadership. The influence of the researcher selection of quotes is hard to gauge, nevertheless the quotes are the authentic voices of the young women.

The review is intrinsically limited by the number of quotes, although the number of quotes deemed to be sufficient for a QMS is difficult to determine. In a search of over thirty recent QMS reviews, none reported the number of quotes in their meta-syntheses. For this review, the limited number of quotes made it untrustworthy to weight the prevalence of the experiences. For example, the category of awareness of others was voiced in three of 80 quotes, but the category was present in half the studies. Although we cannot analyze the prevalence of the experiences, each quote provides insight into the experiences of the young women resulting from their participation in YPAR.

Our QMS adds to the research on the sexual health of young women by listening to their voices about what they obtained from their participation in YPAR projects, not the measurement of researcher-defined outcomes [5]. Our review offers more than a narrative overview of YPAR projects with a reciprocal translation that captures the similarities of empowerment experiences across widely different populations of young women. Our review provides a gender-based analysis that is frequently absent in YPAR projects on sexual health, a significant gap in the literature. The model of the progression of empowerment for young women is based on what they are telling us, the researchers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the beneficial, even life-changing outcomes described by young women in the studies in this review, YPAR projects should be more widely funded. YPAR desired outcomes strengthen several of the rights adolescents as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, including the right to voice opinions and be heard by adults (Article 12), to learn and communicate their views with others (Article 13), to an education that promotes their personal development (Article 29), and the right to practice one’s culture (Article 30). Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including UNICEF and the World Health Organization, have emphasized the need for varied and comprehensive approaches to improve engagement, empowerment, and equity for the healthy development of youth [36]. We believe that YPAR can be an effective methodology in promoting young women’s health and development, and that more projects should be conducted with younger adolescents and include LGBTQ youth. YPAR projects will likely also result in wider benefits to communities because new knowledge for community members and practitioners is crucial to begin the process of positive change in populations [37].

Conclusion

YPAR outcomes on female sexual health is placed in an emerging body of research that highlights the importance of listening, involving, and acting with young female adolescents, to bring forth their voices through their participation instead of a top-down approach. For

young disenfranchised women in particular, YPAR on sexual health can assist them with relationships and lived experiences, solve practical issues in their communities and schools, develop their critical awareness of their socio-political environment, and advocate or take action to influence policies that affect them [6]. Reason and Bradbury emphasize the importance of framing the research within the interests and interpretations of those immediately concerned in the process, and not filtered through an outside researcher’s own assumptions and goals (2008); this aspect of YPAR necessitated a synthesis of the female adolescent voices themselves. Through a comprehensive literature review and screening process, six YPAR studies provided sufficient quotes for analysis that illuminated a progression of empowerment through seven themes. Female youth articulated a gradual progression of agency, from heightened self-awareness and altered lived experiences, to speaking out and talking back against mis-information or oppressive school policies, and finally to educating others and becoming activists in their communities. These findings paralleled the YPAR theoretical outcomes [10, 11] across different locations, cultures, and diverse populations. YPAR researchers have emphasized three conditions for YPAR research: one, providing ‘safe spaces’ for authentic listening and discussion to occur whilst learning to be vulnerable throughout the process [25]; two, allowing extended time involvement for participants to develop relationships and their voices [12, 25], and three, an overall dedication to the philosophy of YPAR [5] to illuminate the power potential of the young women participants [24, 25, 27]. Influencing more YPAR researchers to truly listen, support, and report what the young females are saying and doing, rather than interpreting the female voices for them, is the key to realizing the agency experienced by the young women pertaining to their sexual health within YPAR initiatives. A next step would be to conduct a qualitative study by interviewing marginalized and/or disenfranchised females to obtain primary data for the progression of their empowerment through their participation in YPAR for sexual health.

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