



OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS FROM THE SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IMPACTS ON MARGINALIZED AND VULNERABLE YOUTH

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PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

YouthPower2: Learning and Evaluation (YP2LE) conducted a systematic review of academic and grey literature to better understand youth vulnerability and marginalization in low- and middle- income countries (LMICs); its definitions, contributing factors, youth’s experiences and access to positive youth development (PYD) programming, effective program features and scaling models, and novel dimensions of vulnerability and marginalization. The systematic review was conducted from June 2020 to December 2020. Findings and recommendations for this review are based on the examination of 118 publications, 12 key informant interviews (KIIs) and one youth focus group discussion (FGD) with four youth from USAID’s YP2LE YouthLead Network.

FINDINGS

Our assessment revealed six core findings instrumental to growing the understanding of vulnerability and marginalization among young people in LMICs.

These findings include:

1. Definitions of vulnerability are specific to culture and context.
2. An intrinsic, contextual, and structural typology is important to frame the definition of vulnerability in LMICs.
3. Existing tools for measuring vulnerability are not comprehensive.
4. Programs do not identify as PYD-aligned but incorporate aspects of PYD.
5. Intrinsic, contextual, and structural factors impact access to PYD programs for vulnerable and marginalized youth (VMY) in LMICs.
6. Multi-component and cross-sectoral approaches may be most beneficial for PYD with VMY.

Definitions of vulnerability are specific to culture and context. The meanings of the term “vulnerability” are complex and context-specific, but its uses in the extant literature do not reflect this complexity. Historically,

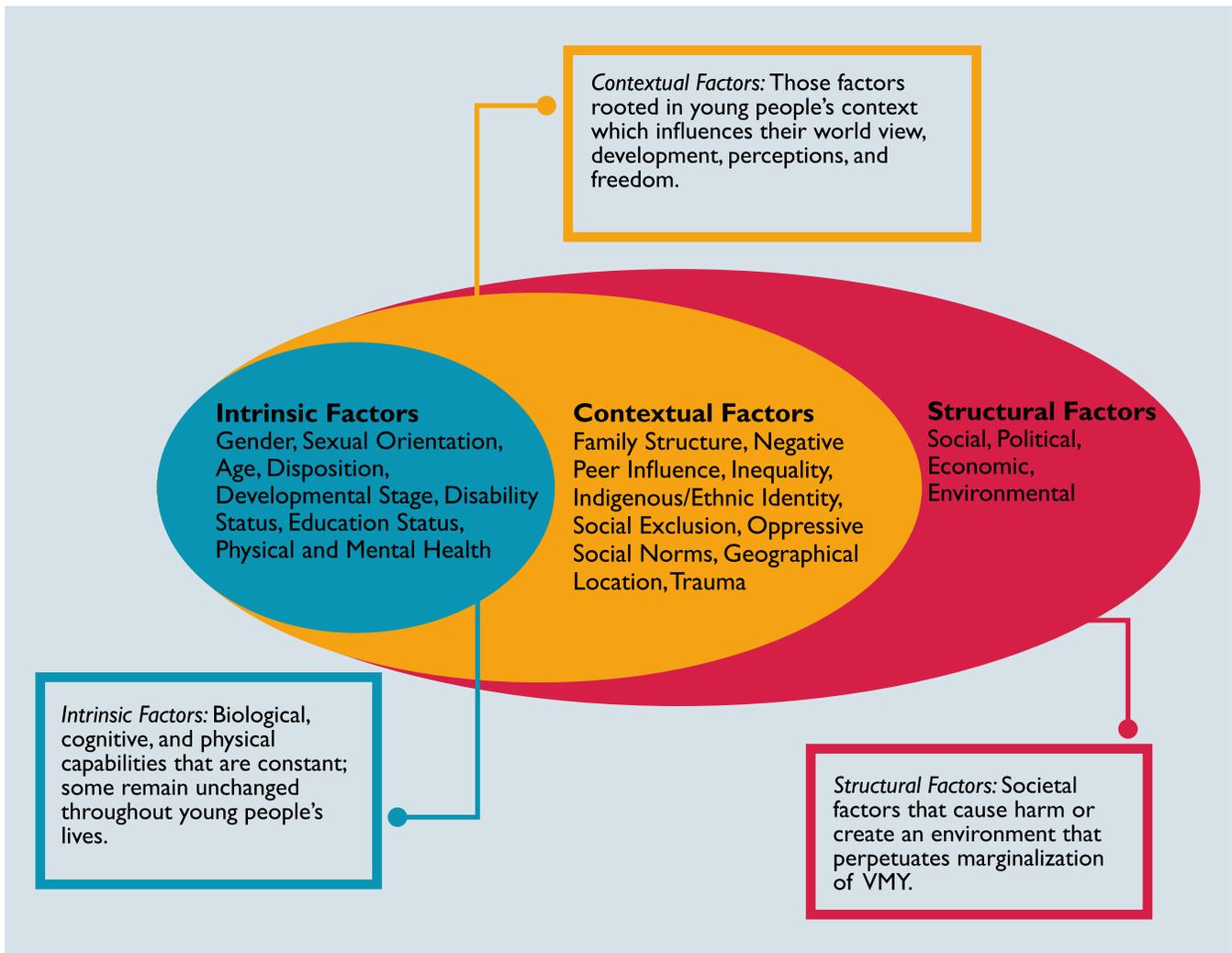


vulnerability in LMICs has been applied to groups, subgroups, or categories of people (e.g., persons with disabilities, refugee, Indigenous). This prioritization of who is vulnerable fails to account for why vulnerability may exist.

An intrinsic, contextual, and structural (ICS) typology (Figure 1) is important to frame the definition of vulnerability in LMICs. Vulnerability for youth in LMICs results from a culturally specific interplay of individual or intrinsic, contextual, and structural factors.

Assessing youth vulnerability in LMICs using the ICS typology is an initial step towards promoting a more culturally responsive and comprehensive approach to understanding and measuring vulnerability. Using the ICS typology has the potential to 1) illustrate the ways that social determinants lead to vulnerability and 2) help practitioners to identify malleable leverage points to support youth agency in addressing some of their vulnerabilities.

Figure 1. Typology of Intrinsic, Contextual, Structural Factors Contributing to Youth’s Vulnerability



Existing tools for measuring vulnerability are not comprehensive. Our review identified few tools or measures for determining the vulnerability and marginalization of youth in LMICs. The tools, like the definitions of vulnerability that underwrote them, were tailored to a population (e.g., girls), specific

issues (e.g., HIV), or implementation-related issues (e.g., strengthening programs for female youth). Because these tools do not account for the interplay of different determinants of vulnerability, they offer an incomplete measure of it.

Most youth-focused programs do not identify as PYD-aligned but incorporate aspects of PYD. Consistent with previous systematic reviews on PYD programs in LMICs (Alvarado et al. 2017), most programs in our review did not identify as PYD-specific programs. However, almost all programs for VMY did incorporate aspects of PYD (e.g., assessment development, enabling environment, and agency domain components). Notably, one major component of PYD was missing: youth contribution.

Intrinsic, contextual, and structural factors impact access to PYD programs for VMY in LMICs. Despite the availability of PYD programs in LMICs, intrinsic, contextual, and structural factors influenced VMY's access to or engagement in the programs. Structural concerns that inhibited youth engagement included lack of income and structural poverty. Contextual barriers were identified as social and cultural norms (e.g., gender inequities) and stigma (e.g., HIV/AIDS, female menstruation). We found several factors that facilitated VMY engagement in PYD programs in LMICs.

These contextual factors included public policies that promote youth access to PYD and community support of programs.

Multi-component and cross-sectoral approaches may be most beneficial for PYD with VMY. These approaches may offer the most promising strategies for addressing vulnerability because they can simultaneously address intrinsic, contextual, and structural factors. At the intrinsic level, programs should address multiple risks for vulnerability by introducing programs that focus on various characteristics of a subgroup (e.g., refugee status, gender, sexual and reproductive health) as opposed to one aspect alone (e.g., gender). Support at the contextual level may include community-based participatory projects with VMY's family and community members that focus on addressing social norms that increase vulnerability. At the structural level, programs should consider pursuing legal and policy reforms that protect youth and enable them to become active, capable, and contributing adults.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from this assessment are broad. To ensure action, our research team prepared recommendations for practice, research, and policy.

Practice

Adopt and implement a reliable framework to allow practitioners and researchers to assess vulnerability across contexts and cultures and plan for differentiated programming. Our research team developed the Intrinsic, Contextual, and Structural Analytical Framework for Vulnerability (ICS framework), which represents a critical first step toward shifting practitioners' and researchers' understanding of vulnerability. This framework shifts the focus from "who" is vulnerable to understanding "what" or "why" an individual is vulnerable, ensuring that definitions of vulnerability arise organically from communities rather than imposing a preformed or universal definition. Using this framework, researchers can accurately measure vulnerability in a way that can best inform targeted programming to address issues of contextually and culturally-specific forms of vulnerability. Supporting and enabling factors at all levels (e.g., individual, environmental, structural) promote youth's capacity and resilience. Suppressive contextual and structural factors may compound the vulnerability youth experience due to intrinsic factors, placing them at greater risk of negative outcomes. For this reason, our strengths-based framework highlights the importance of the enabling environment in building the capacities of young people to have more agency and contribute to their communities.

Develop multicomponent, cross-sectoral interventions that are responsive to the diverse needs of VMY. Our review found that multicomponent, cross-sectoral approaches offered a promising strategy for developing interventions for VMY. An important component of cross-sectoral approaches is purposeful programming at the community or structural level (Melinkas et al. 2019; Stark et al. 2018). Because many VMY think and behave in ways inconsistent with social and cultural norms, increasing societal awareness of and destigmatizing VMY's social circumstances is essential to building effective interventions in a given context. That is, optimizing interventions' effectiveness at the individual level requires broader structural or cultural transformations.

Promote an enabling environment for youth because it is critical for VMY's positive development. Our review revealed several features of optimal programming for VMY that are consistent with a PYD approach; one domain stood out as critical for VMY: an enabling environment. The choice of which enabling environment is optimal for PYD depends on the type of VMY, as illustrated by their intrinsic characteristics and relevant contextual and structural factors. Gender-biased cultural and social norms; public policies; stigma and discrimination; and poverty and social exclusion are some examples of structural factors that need to be thoughtfully addressed so PYD programming for VMY can be contextually meaningful. Thus, PYD programming should tailor its implementation to engage with sensitive and (in some places criminalized) issues affecting VMY in LMICs. Our review found that mentorships, safe spaces, and support from youth's parents, peer groups, schools, and communities are important cross-cutting components of successful youth-focused programming that has assisted VMY in various transitions in their lives.

Adopt differentiated models of programming to address a variety of VMY needs. The nuanced needs, preferences, and circumstances of different VMY populations cannot be addressed by universal interventions in all contexts and for all outcomes. Rather, an adaptable cross-sectoral approach that addresses specific needs of VMY populations and their communities will be required to deliver effective programming tailored to different settings. Depending on the desired outcomes, the components, contents, and materials of this cross-sectoral approach will likely be different and context-specific.

Promote the participation of VMY in all aspects of the development of interventions for VMY. The current consensus among development practitioners



and researchers indicates that youth's participation in the development of youth-directed programming increases program efficacy. However, VMY traditionally have not participated in the development of VMY-directed programming. This lack of participation is a major missed opportunity: many of the studies we reviewed indicated that the most helpful and poignant information that researchers gathered about the lives and experiences of VMY came from VMY themselves. Youth programming targeted towards VMY should intentionally include VMY in conceptualizing needs; addressing those needs; monitoring and evaluating programs; and course correcting service delivery when needs are not being met.

Research

Develop and rigorously test frameworks that will identify VMY in different contexts and develop targeted programs that will address VMY needs.

Researchers should explore the use of frameworks like the ICS framework to assess vulnerability, inform the development of tools to identify vulnerable youth in different contexts, and measure youths' vulnerability in accordance with the concept. This will require a process of developing indicators, measuring vulnerability, validating these measures and testing their reliability. Further, these tools could be used to identify leverage points for targeted programming to address the needs of vulnerable youth and build their capacity and agency.

Develop a white paper on who and what youth are today. Researchers should produce an expository paper proposing a clear age-based definition of youth and explaining why the proposed age range makes sense from a developmental, biological, psychological, and social perspective. This paper should also provide guidance for systematically establishing age-based distinctions between youth, adolescents, children, and adults, even if it does not resolve the current age overlaps between these categories. To date, literature has provided justifications for definitions of children and adolescents, but no similar publications have provided explanations for contemporary definitions for youth.

Rigorously test multi-component, cross-sectoral interventions to build evidence of the efficacy of these intervention designs for supporting VMY. Our findings and the youth development field have emphasized the importance of multi-component, cross-sectoral interventions to address the multi-layering of vulnerabilities among young people. However, little evidence exists regarding best practices and the effects of such interventions. More research and investment in

building evidence for multi-component, cross-sectoral interventions will help establish the relative efficacy of these intervention designs for supporting VMY.

Develop localized, participatory frameworks to address harmful social norms that affect vulnerable youth.

Harmful social norms can have far-reaching impacts and, when internalized by VMY, can diminish well-being and exacerbate negative outcomes. However, because social norms are both context-specific and sensitive,





interventions seeking to change social norms must be tailored to the specific values of the communities where they will be implemented. Although there are no established best practices for addressing harmful social norms, our review of the literature indicates that localized, participatory learning processes offer a promising approach.

Conduct a rigorous, systematic qualitative study with hard to reach vulnerable and marginalized youth.

Researchers may explore conducting a rigorous and systematic qualitative study to understand what vulnerability is for the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach youth. The studies in this systematic review demonstrated the challenges in reaching youth who are vulnerable. Amplifying the voices of youth who may face substantiated or several layers of vulnerability or marginalization will require additional effort to reach them and build their agency to present a more authentic picture of their experiences. The benefit being that the youth development field will move from using proxies to understand VMYs and have a clearer picture of who these youth are, their needs and experiences, and how to improve their well-being.

Policy

Advocate for policy and legal frameworks that will protect, decriminalize, and provide access to needed services for VMY.

Findings in this systematic review indicate that the identities of VMY may put them at risk for harm, violence, and denial of basic services. Consequently, such youth may not seek the services they need for fear of being discriminated against or targeted for violence because of laws that further exacerbate their marginalization and exclusion. Advocating for legal reform and frameworks that will decriminalize the identities of some VMY will ensure the protection of youth and promote accessible services. Similarly, developing policies that focus on upholding the human rights of youth with disabilities in alignment with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities may ensure that youth with disabilities have their right to access to services realized.

Enact policies that will mandate cross-sectoral and integrated approaches to youth development. The youth development field has acknowledged the value of cross-sectoral and integrated programming as an optimal approach to youth development, particularly for VMY. However, knowledge exchange and acknowledgement alone does not integrate this approach into development plans for local and national governments. Until there is national development policy that acknowledges and integrates cross-sectoral

programming as the approach for VMY, knowledge exchange and reporting on promising programming will not enhance integration across planning at the local, regional, and national level of the development process.

Insert social norms assessments and approaches in local and national youth development plans. Similar to gender analysis and assessment that national policies across LMICs have now integrated into their plans of action, social norms should also be considered. Although not all social norms are harmful, an assessment of how social norms are affecting VMY should be a standard procedural assessment for all youth programming so that youth development approaches can address negative social norms and integrate positive ones across programs.

CONCLUSIONS

Vulnerability is a complex concept that eludes precise definition. In many existing definitions, vulnerability is used as a term to group behaviors, situations, or circumstances avoiding the underlying root of what vulnerability is. To adequately meet the needs of VMY and improve their well-being, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers must consider the cultural and contextual specificity of vulnerability and marginalization for youth in LMICs. The ICS framework proposed in this systematic review uses a strengths-based approach to identify various underlying causes, proximate causes, and suppressive and supportive contextual factors that influence youths' behaviors and skills through human development transitions, leading to youth's varied experiences. Using the ICS framework to frame the understanding of vulnerability offers researchers and practitioners an opportunity to develop culturally relevant and context-specific definitions that will inform the specific components of PYD programs. Through this targeted approach, researchers and practitioners will be better positioned to meet the needs of VMY in LMICs, ultimately ensuring that their livelihoods and well-being improve.



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About YouthPower2: Learning and Evaluation

The USAID-funded YouthPower2: Learning and Evaluation (YP2LE) activity deepens the integration of positive youth development (PYD) evidence and best practices into youth programming, ensuring more sustainable change. PYD is a widely accepted philosophy and approach that, when applied appropriately, ensures youth are empowered to reach their full potential. The PYD approach builds skills, assets, and competencies; fosters healthy relationships; strengthens the environment; and transforms systems. YP2LE activities are designed to examine the impact of cross-sectoral youth programming in collaboration with USAID, YouthPower implementing partners, PYD researchers, youth-led and youth-serving organizations, individual young change-makers, and other relevant stakeholders. The goal of this three-year activity is to give practitioners the information, tools, and resources they need to develop high-quality, impactful, and sustainable youth programs allowing empowered youth, working with supportive adults, to create the kind of sustainable change in individuals and systems that leads to self-reliance. YP2LE achieves this through a four-pronged approach that includes research, a learning network, digital platforms and champions, and rapid-response technical support. For more information, visit youthpower.org.

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