

A. COMMUNITY MAPPING EXERCISE AS A CHILD/GIRL-FRIENDLY RESEARCH TOOL

1. Introduction: Concept and Rationale

A mapping exercise is a participatory and visual research method through which participants create drawings or spatial representations of their environments, experiences and social realities. When applied with children, particularly girls, it becomes an empowering methodological approach that positions them not merely as respondents, but as co-researchers and active producers of knowledge.

This approach recognizes that participants often communicate more effectively through visual and creative expression than through conventional verbal or written methods. By using drawings, symbols and storytelling, mapping creates a safe, engaging and inclusive space where participants can freely express their lived realities. It is particularly valuable in uncovering nuanced, sensitive, or hidden experiences that may otherwise remain unspoken, such as feelings of insecurity, exclusion or fear.

For example, Population Council developed one of the most practical and widely used mapping tools for Adolescent research and Girl-centered programming, which has been especially influential in participatory research in development contexts. Ultimately, mapping as a research tool centers the voices and perspectives of girls, ensuring that their realities are not only heard but also meaningfully interpreted within research and policy processes.

2. Application of Mapping in Research with Children/Girls

Mapping exercises are highly versatile and can be used to explore a wide range of issues affecting children and girls in their everyday environments. Through spatial representation, participants are able to illustrate both physical and social dimensions of their experiences. For instance, mapping can be used to identify safe and unsafe spaces within schools or communities, highlighting areas where girls feel secure versus those associated with risk or discomfort. It can also reveal access to essential services, such as water, sanitation, education, and healthcare, thereby shedding light on inequalities and barriers.

Additionally, mapping helps to trace mobility patterns, illustrating where girls go, at what times, and for what purposes. This provides insight into restrictions, freedoms, and daily routines. The tool is equally effective in examining power dynamics, such as who controls certain spaces and how inclusion or exclusion is experienced. Another critical dimension is the exploration of emotional geographies, where participants associate places with feelings such as fear, joy, or freedom. This allows researchers to move beyond physical mapping into the realm of emotional and psychological experiences.

Because of its visual and participatory nature, mapping encourages the inclusion of shy, marginalized, or less articulate participants, ensuring that diverse voices are captured. It also helps reveal sensitive issues such as harassment zones or gender-based restrictions that may not emerge through traditional data collection methods.

3. The Process of conducting a Mapping Exercise

The implementation of a mapping exercise follows a structured yet flexible process designed to ensure meaningful participation and ethical engagement.

The process begins with preparation, where the researcher defines a clear objective, such as understanding girls' safety within school environments. Appropriate materials such as flip charts, markers, and colored pens are assembled and ethical considerations, including informed consent, assent and confidentiality, are carefully addressed. This is followed by an introduction and rapport-building phase, where participants are made comfortable through icebreakers and simple explanations of the activity. It is essential to emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers, thereby reducing anxiety and encouraging open participation.

The core stage is the mapping activity itself, where participants are invited to draw maps of their school, home, or community. They are encouraged to include important places, routes they frequently use, and areas they like or dislike. This creative process allows participants to externalize their experiences in a tangible form. To deepen the analysis, participants engage in annotation and symbol use, assigning meanings to different spaces using colors or symbols for example, green for safe or happy places, red for unsafe or scary areas and yellow for neutral zones. Participants may also create their own symbolic systems, enhancing ownership and creativity.

The exercise is enriched through discussion and storytelling, where participants explain their maps and the meanings behind their representations. This stage is crucial, as it transforms the visual outputs into rich qualitative data by capturing narratives, interpretations, and personal experiences. Subsequently, documentation is undertaken through note-taking, photographs (with consent), and recording of narratives. Both the visual maps and the accompanying explanations are preserved as data. The process concludes with reflection and closure, where participants' contributions are validated, and emotional support is provided if sensitive issues have emerged. This ensures that the research process remains ethical, respectful, and participant-centered.

4. Types of questions in Mapping Exercises

The effectiveness of mapping as a research tool is significantly influenced by the nature of the questions posed. Questions should be open-ended, simple and non-threatening to encourage honest and meaningful responses.

Participants may be asked to identify places they visit daily and explain their significance. Questions such as where they feel safe and why, or which places they avoid and what happens there, help uncover perceptions of safety and risk. Exploring where they go to study or play provides insight into access to resources and opportunities. Further probing can address issues of restriction and inequality, for example by asking whether there are places they are not allowed to go, or whether boys and girls use spaces differently. Questions that invite reflection such as what would make certain places better encourage participants to think critically and propose solutions.

These questions not only guide the mapping process but also deepen the narratives that emerge, making the data more comprehensive and actionable.

5. Integrating Mapping with Photovoice for rich data generation

To enhance the depth and richness of data, mapping exercises can be effectively integrated with photovoice, another participatory visual methodology. While mapping captures spatial perceptions and representations, photovoice adds a layer of real-world visual evidence through photography.

The integration begins with introducing participants to photovoice by providing cameras or mobile phones and offering basic training on ethical photography, including issues of consent and privacy. Participants are guided on the types of images to capture, particularly those that reflect the spaces and experiences illustrated in their maps.

During the photo collection phase, participants take photographs of locations identified in their maps, as well as situations that represent their daily realities. This creates a visual link between perceived and lived experiences. The next stage involves photo discussion and critical reflection, where participants interpret their images using guiding prompts such as what is happening in the photo, why it was taken, and how it relates to their maps. A useful framework for this process is the SHOWED technique, which encourages participants to reflect on what they see, what is happening, how it relates to their lives, why the situation exists, how they can be empowered and what actions can be taken.

Finally, data integration brings together the maps and photographs, allowing researchers to compare what was drawn with what was captured visually. This process helps identify patterns, contradictions and deeper meanings, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.

6. Conclusion

Mapping exercises, particularly when combined with photovoice, offer a powerful, child- and girl-friendly approach to research. By prioritizing participation, creativity and visual expression, these methods enable children to articulate their lived realities in ways that are authentic, nuanced and impactful.

As a research tool, mapping not only generates rich qualitative data but also fosters empowerment, giving girls the opportunity to reflect on their environments, voice their concerns and contribute to meaningful change. In this way, it transcends data collection to become a transformative process that amplifies marginalized voices and informs more inclusive policies and interventions.

B. Community Mapping Exercise through Girl-Led Interviews, Observations, and Reflections

This participatory exercise builds on initial community mapping or workshop activities and is designed to deepen girls' understanding of empowerment, community power structures, and the factors that restrict or support their agency. Once girls have developed a foundational awareness of these concepts, they can be meaningfully engaged as co-researchers in both data collection and analysis.

Through girl-led interviews, observations, and reflections, participants explore how women and girls in their communities perceive and exercise agency in their everyday lives. This approach not only strengthens experiential learning but also fosters collective inquiry through intergenerational dialogue. By engaging in conversations with women such as mothers, aunts, sisters, and female peers; girls gain insight into lived experiences across generations. These exchanges create opportunities for mutual learning, storytelling, and reflection, enabling girls to better understand the socio-cultural contexts that shape agency, including norms, expectations, and structural constraints.

Importantly, this process encourages girls to situate their own experiences within a broader social landscape. By examining how other women navigate similar or different challenges, girls are able to critically reflect on their own sense of agency, recognize patterns, and identify both barriers and enablers within their environments.

The exercise can be implemented in three key steps:

Step 1: Co-Designing the Inquiry

Researchers work with a group of girls who have already participated in introductory workshops on agency and community mapping. Together, they co-design a set of guiding questions to be used in conversations with women older than them (typically post-teen participants). This step is critical for grounding the exercise in the girls' own lived experiences and perspectives. It allows them to reflect individually and collectively on what agency means to them and how it manifests in their context.

For example, in previous research conducted in Pakistan, the following guiding questions were developed:

- When and how do women exercise agency?
- When and how are they unable to exercise agency?
- What factors influence these experiences?
- What strategies or initiatives can help overcome barriers to agency?
- Who supports or enables women in navigating these challenges?

Step 2: Girl-Led Data Collection

Each girl conducts conversations with at least two women within her household or neighborhood. Using the co-designed questions as a guide, girls document responses through notes, drawings, or other creative formats. This step emphasizes active listening, observation, and respectful engagement, while also allowing girls to take ownership of the research process.

Step 3: Collective Reflection and Analysis

Girls reconvene in a facilitated session (approximately half a day) to share their findings. They bring their notes, drawings, or other forms of documentation and present their

insights to the group. This is not intended to be a simple reporting exercise; rather, it serves as a space for collective reflection and meaning-making.

Researchers guide a structured discussion to help participants analyze emerging patterns and themes. Together, they explore how the collected stories illustrate key dimensions of agency, such as decision-making processes, influential actors, and enabling or constraining social norms. This collaborative analysis strengthens critical thinking and reinforces the value of shared knowledge.

Overall, this exercise not only generates rich, contextually grounded insights but also empowers girls as knowledge producers. By positioning them as co-researchers and facilitating intergenerational dialogue, the process contributes to building confidence, analytical skills, and a deeper understanding of agency within their communities.