



**A DISCUSSION PAPER ON  
MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT**





With aspirations and experience in our own right, we are taking what is within our grasp to build a better world. This is the power we hold as young people, to reimagine the world, with the tenacity, innovation and courage to disrupt every cycle that yields negative results for women and girls.

— Yemurai Nyoni, 26 years old, Zimbabwe

## About Women Deliver

As a leading global advocate for girls' and women's health, rights and wellbeing, Women Deliver brings together diverse voices and interests to drive progress, particularly in maternal, sexual, and reproductive health and rights. Women Deliver builds capacity, shares solutions, and forges partnerships, together creating coalitions, communication, and action that spark political commitment and investment in girls and women.

Since 2010, Women Deliver has engaged 400 outstanding young people to be global leaders for advancing gender equality and the sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and women. In 2015, Women Deliver's youth program was named as one of the top four global health programs fostering youth leadership. Each Young Leader participates in online courses designed to strengthen skills and increase understanding of the issues that impact girls and women. Many Young Leaders then go on to apply for seed grants to fund projects of their own design to be implemented in their communities and countries.

## Working Definition of Meaningful Youth Engagement

For this discussion paper, Women Deliver reviewed numerous organizations' operational definitions of meaningful youth engagement and participation, as well as theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Collating various elements of these sources, Women Deliver defines meaningful youth engagement in the following terms:

*Meaningful youth engagement is a participatory process in which young people's ideas, expertise, experiences, and perspectives are integrated throughout programmatic, policy, and institutional decision-making structures so as to best inform outcomes. This process requires young people to be involved in all levels and stages of program, policy, campaign, and initiative development, including all stages of design, implementation, and evaluation; this is especially true of those programs that directly affect their lives. This participation and engagement must be supported by access to accurate and youth-friendly information, meaningful decision-making mechanisms, and fully integrated accountability mechanisms from stakeholders. This also includes the integration of diverse perspectives and populations in decision-making, especially from those who are most marginalized.*

## Introduction

When young people are asked to articulate the barriers they face to meaningful youth engagement, to identify the tools and resources that would help them in their advocacy efforts, and to imagine what their ideal world looks like when it comes to meaningful youth engagement, they have clear answers. They want trust and acceptance in their role at the decision-making table; true partnerships and opportunities for intergenerational dialogue; data, evidence, and youth-friendly research; media and communication tools and support; and technical and financial support and resources to more effectively fill their seat at the table. This is particularly true when it comes to advocacy for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for young people.

At the same time, it is clear that institutions who listen to and include young people in their decision-making are more likely to develop programs and policies that reflect young people's experiences, making those programs more effective while also more efficiently using resources. In addition, experience shows that engaging young people as researchers, evaluators, advocates, and program designers can improve the quality and relevance of data collected and can increase program accountability and support.<sup>1</sup>

### Meaningful youth engagement means:

- Inclusion of young people in all stages of developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programs, policies, and investment of resources – from start to finish.<sup>2</sup>
- Diverse representation that goes beyond tokenism and includes young people's engagement from marginalized populations.
- Young people's access to accurate information and training when necessary, in order to effectively understand the technical content, the political context, and the stakeholders with whom they are engaging.
- Power-sharing between and among stakeholders so that young people are partners and leaders, rather than beneficiaries.<sup>3</sup>
- Clear and transparent communication that everyone can understand – no jargon!<sup>4</sup>

The Women Deliver 2016 Global Conference brings together 5000+ world influencers and various stakeholders working on the health, rights, and wellbeing of girls and women to share their experiences, challenges, and visions in the era of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There will be more than 1,000 young people under the age of 30 actively participating and contributing throughout the conference, and one of the important discussion items on the agenda is how to enhance meaningful youth engagement.

To better inform this discussion, Women Deliver conducted a consultation about youth engagement, which included a literature review, interviews with key stakeholders, and a survey with 600 young people — between the ages of 17-33 from 109 countries and every region of the world — within the organization's existing network of young SRHR advocates.

The goal of this work was to take the initial steps towards improving and enhancing youth engagement by better understanding young people's own perspectives on the barriers they face and their needs to effectively advocate (especially for SRHR) and enhance their engagement, within the context of existing principles and practices. The result is a glimpse into the way young people themselves want to engage and be engaged, along with initial suggestions of what needs to be done to overcome the longstanding challenges preventing meaningful youth engagement.

<sup>1</sup> Rutgers WPF and International Planned Parenthood Federation. *Explore Toolkit for Involving Young People as Researchers in Sexual and Reproductive Health Programs*. 2013. Retrieved from: <http://www.rutgers.international/our-products/tools/explore>

<sup>2</sup> YOUTH DO IT! Meaningful Youth Participation Course. Retrieved from <http://www.youthdoit.org/meaningful-youth-participation/>

<sup>3</sup> PACT, UNAIDS & the Global Fund. *Making the money work for young people: a participation tool for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria For Country Coordinating Mechanism members and other Global Fund actors*. 2014. Retrieved from [http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/IC2661\\_part2\\_en.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/IC2661_part2_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> International Planned Parenthood Federation. *Participate: The voice of young people in programmes and policies*. 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.ippf.org/resource/Participate-voice-young-people-programmes-and-policies>

# Barriers to Young People's Engagement in Advocacy for SRHR

It takes time and resources to engage young people meaningfully, and familiar barriers exist at every stage: lack of trust and resources, systematic exclusion of minorities and marginalized young people, and weak systems and organizational structures that don't effectively include young people.

The main barriers to meaningful youth engagement, as highlighted by the young people in the Women Deliver consultation survey results, are:

## Cultural and religious norms

Young people who cannot openly express their sexuality don't feel comfortable accessing services or information, can't speak openly about issues of SRHR, and are less likely to engage openly in discussions and in decision-making spaces. In this void where the voices of young people should be heard, programs and policies are designed based on perceptions of what is considered "proper" or "best" for young people — rather than the actual needs of young people themselves. Bias and stigma from service providers and health workers can also act as barriers to information and education for young people in need of access to services, especially when it comes to unmarried young people and contraception.

"A society where a rigid view of religion exists stops young people from actively participating in dialogue. We are living in a society where you cannot openly talk about or use the word 'SEX'."

— Umair Mushtaq, 22 years old, Pakistan

## Lack of information and education

Too many young people still lack access to comprehensive information and options when it comes to their own rights. Young people attribute this lack of information to low literacy rates or low levels of education, inaccessible or "jargony" information that is not sensitive to culture and context, and a shortage of accurate and current SRHR educational materials available in local languages that use youth-friendly terms.

"Values in conservative societies and cultures hold youth back from being exposed to essential information on sexual and reproductive health. It is crucial to work with community leaders in those places in order to make this message clear and non-threatening."

— Maya Saryyeva, 29 years old, Turkmenistan

## Level of trust in and respect for youth perspectives

Older people don't always believe that young people are capable of making good decisions about their own lives and circumstances, especially as it pertains to SRHR. Young women are particularly silenced and often face more serious social and cultural repercussions for speaking out about SRHR when compared with their male counterparts.

"Because of their age, adults mostly think that youths are incapable and cannot deliver as required in the field."

— SM Shaikat, 28 years old, Bangladesh

## Few safe spaces or opportunities to learn and engage

Young people often have to create their own opportunities for capacity building and strengthening, knowledge-sharing, and meaningful dialogue. There are limited safe places to ask questions and speak openly, especially among and between generations and about SRHR issues. Furthermore, when young people are consulted in development policies or programs, but decisions don't shift as a result, young people may lose interest and feel disenfranchised. For young people who are committed to making change, tokenistic engagement is not enough.

"Young people are often frustrated by adults when trying to meaningfully participate and sometimes when they participate, their decision won't count — resulting in apathy in young people."

— Onward Chironda, 24 years old, Zimbabwe

# Core Elements for Meaningful Youth Engagement

The ideal world of meaningful youth engagement, as highlighted by the young people in the Women Deliver consultation survey results, is one where:

- Young people provide input at all stages of decision-making, implementation, and monitoring of programs and policies.
- Young people's voices are heard without judgment, stigma, discrimination, or threat of violence.
- Young people from marginalized populations are integrated into meaningful youth engagement efforts.
- Power-sharing is realized across all ages, and young people's expertise and contribution is given equal weight.
- A robust youth civil society movement is supported and well-resourced.

“Ideally, meaningful youth engagement is normalized across all spheres of policy development, advocacy and project development, and service delivery. Young people in all of their diversity are enabled and empowered to have their voices heard, their concerns listened and responded to, and their ideas and projects supported, engaged with, and implemented.”

— Alisa Draskovic, 25 years old, former refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina

In order to achieve this ideal world for engagement, strategic investments need to be made. Through the Women Deliver's consultation with key informants and results from the survey with young people, core elements to improve meaningful youth engagement were identified that are key areas for investment:

## Acceptance and trust of young people's role at the decision-making table

To further meaningful youth engagement, it is important to provide a space that is free of judgment and stigma. For real change to take place, open communication without fear of repercussion is necessary.

## Partnerships and opportunities for intergenerational dialogue

Effective partnership and dialogue, which focus on both the exchange of wisdom and insight between young people and older allies or mentors who “get it,” as well as building capacity through learning, information-sharing, and movement-building opportunities, is needed. Dialogue is especially important in the start-up phases of any initiative; young people must be engaged from the very beginning, not simply consulted at the end as an afterthought.

## Data, evidence, and youth-friendly research

There is a need for research (and the funding it requires) to generate evidence about what is and isn't working when it comes to meaningful youth engagement. To reflect young people's lived realities, young people themselves need to be consulted in the development of research questions and the analyses of findings. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be designed to demonstrate the impact of youth policies and programs, including financial tracking. Development of a central hub for reports, briefs, toolkits, and other materials related to youth engagement and SRHR, in addition to stories and case studies showcasing examples of effective meaningful youth engagement, would help young people access youth-friendly data and learn from others doing similar work.

“[We need] more evidence on the benefits of youth engagement (yes, we still need to work on ‘convincing’ adults that it's good to engage youth). Also in a dream world there would be youth engagement clauses with funding that NGOs/INGOs/ Governments receive that would require them to engage young people.”

— Maria Jose Rivas Vera, 29 years old, Paraguay

## Media and communications tools and support, including social and digital media

Young people realize that utilizing both traditional and digital media can better inform general audiences about the issues they face and make sure young people's priorities are a part of the conversation. Building and strengthening the capacity of young people to use media will support their advocacy and engagement efforts. Social media tools and platforms can support young people in the creation of a range of digital materials. Editorial writing, key message development, and relationship building with the media can also be the subject of media training and skill-building workshops.

“Grassroots advocacy is very important in a not yet connected country like the Philippines. Social media is a great avenue for advocacy, but traditional media is still prevalent, including radio and TV.”

— Angeli Siladan, 22 years old, Philippines

## Allocation of technical and financial resources to enhance young people's capacity to effectively fill their seat at the table

Funding, training, and tools should be provided in the most efficient, effective, and respectful manner possible. In some cases, young people may need additional training or access to tools and resources to position themselves as effective advocates with equal power in discussions and decision-making. This also means that young people, like their adult colleagues, cannot be viewed as volunteers; their time and expertise is worthy of compensation. In the Women Deliver consultation survey, young people overwhelmingly identified increased access to funding as a major priority.

“Young people need a supportive environment for effective advocacy, where resources are made available to engage policymakers at all levels, including financial resources to fund young people's participation in outreach and dialogue, and access to trainings and advocacy skills development.”

— Diana Nakaweesa, 26 years old, Uganda

## Conclusion

Young people are not only the leaders of tomorrow, they are leaders of today; their opportunities, needs, and choices regarding their health, rights, and wellbeing will define and shape the world. Young people play a crucial role in advocacy for SRHR; engagement is not only their right, but is pivotal to progress for all and to realizing the SDGs. Recognizing the centrality of the role of young people opens the door for more robust and comprehensive collective efforts for meaningful youth engagement. This initial effort to engage young people directly and to listen and take into account the barriers they identify and the tools and resources they need to more effectively engage offers a snapshot of the path ahead.

This discussion paper makes it clear that more consultation, research, and documentation of lessons learned is needed in order to develop guidelines and put forward a plan for how to take meaningful youth engagement to scale. Women Deliver will keep working on the issues and continue to engage young people in the work at the Women Deliver 2016 Global Conference and beyond.



Meaningful youth engagement is a powerful catalyzing process to materialize the sustainable development we hope to achieve by 2030. It is an investment that reiterates the commitment of leaving no one behind, and a unique opportunity to transform the collaborative relationship between different generations working towards the same objective.

— *Cecilia Garcia Ruiz, 30 years old, Mexico*

## Acknowledgements

The Women Deliver Youth Program Team extends its appreciation and acknowledgement to the following individuals whose views informed this paper via survey responses or interviews:

- Alumni of the 2013 Women Deliver 100 Young Leaders Program
- Current members of the 2016 Women Deliver 200 Young Leaders Program
- Women Deliver 2016 Global Conference youth scholarship recipients
- Prateek Awasthi, *UNFPA*
- Heather Barclay, *IPPF Central Office*
- Heather Boonstra, *Guttmacher Institute*
- Ishita Chaudry, *YP Foundation*
- Cecilia Garcia Ruiz, *Espolea*
- Kate Gilmore, *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*
- Mimi Melles, *UNAIDS*
- Isaiah Owolabi, *HACEY Initiative*
- Suzanne Petroni, *International Center for Research on Women*
- Chelsea Ricker, *Independent Consultant*
- Daniel Tobon Garcia, *Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights*
- Kadi Toure, *The Partnership (PMNCH)*



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