



**Meaningful Youth
Engagement:
Sharing Power,
Advancing Progress,
Driving Change**

There's power in numbers, so let's talk about them. More than half the world's population is under the age of 30. The largest youth population in history¹ means that there are more than 1.8 billion youth alive today.

It's understandable, then, that the sheer size of today's youth population is often cited as a reason to take action for young people's health and rights, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Yet, this is hardly the most compelling reason to meaningfully engage young people in these areas. When it comes to meaningfully engaging young people, it's about way more than just the numbers.

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Young people are uniquely positioned to disrupt power dynamics that have contributed to grave challenges throughout the world, such as climate change, poverty, conflict, violence, and persistent gender inequality, including lack of access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights. Through the Women Deliver Young Leaders Program and many other channels, Women Deliver has come to see firsthand how young people today hold the key to unlocking society's collective progress on some of the world's most entrenched problems. Tapping into this power requires establishing new ways of working and interacting that meaningfully engage youth in a broad range of policies and programs focused on building a healthier, equitable, and sustainable society.

Practicing meaningful youth engagement requires an acute attention to POWER.

In other words, practicing meaningful youth engagement requires an acute attention to POWER. Efforts to increase the quality and quantity of meaningful engagement opportunities for young people must include:

- **ATTENTION TO POWER**

Focus on who is in power and why, and understand how power gets used, negotiated, and reinforced in both *overt* and *subtle* ways.

- **INTENTION TO SHIFT POWER**

Be willing and open to renegotiate, disrupt, and/or dismantle power structures that exclude young people in general, and certain groups of young people in particular, from the ability to impact decisions being made about them, their lives, and their futures.

- **ACTION FROM THOSE IN POWER**

Proactive action from adult allies and powerbrokers is key to ensuring social change.

Young people are regularly excluded from political processes, economic activities, and educational opportunities—sometimes intentionally, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes in the name of protection, but often with far-reaching and detrimental effects. Likewise, patterns of exclusion that appear in broader society can be replicated in programs and other



“Meaningful adolescent and youth engagement is an inclusive, intentional, mutually-respectful partnership between adolescents, youth, and adults whereby power is shared...”

(Global Consensus Statement on Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement; available at: <https://www.who.int/pmnch/mye-statement.pdf>)

opportunities for young people, resulting in the silencing or marginalization of certain groups of young people in particular. In contrast, **meaningful youth engagement** serves as a positive force against this systemic exclusion. When it confronts power, meaningful youth engagement disrupts those patterns of exclusion by facing them squarely, acknowledging them honestly, and addressing them proactively.

Complicated, But Worth It

Often, leadership or engagement programs focus on skills-building. And certainly, skills- and knowledge-building are important for effective leadership, advocacy, or other engagement work.ⁱⁱ Power without preparation will not get society where it wants to be, **but neither will preparation or training without attention to power**. Research and experience show that skills-building alone, without opportunities to put those skills to use, is counter-productive and frustrating.ⁱⁱⁱ Engagement opportunities must be **authentic**, in the sense that they are not simply preparation for some future participation, but are connected to actual opportunities to exert power today.

Truly meaningful engagement opportunities move beyond a focus on elevating young people's voices to supporting their action and decision-making in programs, policies, funding, and research. Voices can be heard, but ignored, unless underlying power structures are changed. When this happens, it can actually have the opposite of the intended effect of the engagement effort. Rather than sharing power, it perpetuates existing inequalities and serves as a means of preserving the status quo while paying lip service to change, further marginalizing youth by tokenizing their presence and contribution.

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Meaningful youth engagement also requires attention to the multiplicity of ways that power plays out interpersonally, institutionally, and systemically, and how the unique needs and diversity of young people's lived experiences create different relationships with power. Young people are not a homogenous group, so meaningful youth engagement cannot be a homogenous concept.¹ Meaningful engagement for a 15-year-old male student living in Nairobi, for example, does not mean the same thing as it does for a 21-year-old queer young woman living in a Syrian refugee camp. The potential for meaningful youth engagement to disrupt inequitable power structures depends on first understanding the unique ways that power and identity intersect in the lives of individual young people.

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This is especially important for economically and politically disenfranchised groups of young people (such as those who identify as LGBTQIA+, indigenous, living with disabilities, and refugees) who typically experience the effects of social stigmatization and marginalization most harshly and often have fewer opportunities for civic and political participation.^{iv} For example, a young person from a low-income community might identify an opportunity to participate in a civic decision-making body, but can't take advantage of the opportunity because it requires transportation resources to get to meetings. A transgender woman may certainly hesitate to get involved in planning a community workshop on women's health if a member of the group has made transphobic remarks in the past.

While many conventional programs for young people may not deal with larger issues of power and exclusion, those that do frame engagement through a power lens

create exciting opportunities to examine and address these issues head on. Those programs are mindful of and responsive to the unique and specific needs of young people, whether they identify as LGBTQIA+ or indigenous, and the unique combinations of identities with which young people identify. To do this well takes commitment: of time, of funding and other resources, and to continuous learning and improvement.

The Ripple Effects of Meaningful Youth Engagement

The positive returns of meaningful youth engagement are far-reaching and multi-layered. Certainly, young people who find ongoing opportunities to engage in their programs, organizations, communities, and world realize personal growth and long-term benefits. These range from health and psychosocial benefits, to a sense of belonging, to 21st century workplace skills.^v Young people's engagement also builds cultural competencies and skills in recognizing and proactively addressing oppression, as well as civic competencies like social trust, respect, and intergroup understanding, all of which are critically important for workplace success and effective participation as citizens.^{vi}

All of the ways that young people themselves benefit from their engagement is only part of the story. When young people access and exercise their power, that power has ripple effects that can positively transform the groups and institutions in which they are exercising their power. When young people are meaningfully engaged in ways that truly dismantle barriers and break down systems of exclusion—whether based on age, gender, class, ethnicity, or other facets of identity—they change not only their own lives, but also the systems in which those lives are situated. They practice and apply skills for building a democratic society that is based on human rights. They develop long-lasting skills that contribute to greater social cohesion, less crime, more stable communities, more effective workplaces, and better decision-making regarding health.^{vii} Their work ripples outward from the local to the global, from individual empowerment to collective social change.

With a focus on power and dismantling systems of exclusion, meaningful youth engagement can also be a powerful strategy for creating the kinds of workplaces and organizations that our society needs, for today and tomorrow. When meaningful youth engagement disrupts patterns of exclusion, it contributes to a more just society. It opens up workplaces, civic spaces, and other institutions to be more inclusive of all kinds of diversity, not only age. And that's good not only for young people, but for all those who have the bravery and vision to practice meaningful youth engagement, even if it means sometimes leaving their comfort zone, or stepping aside and sharing power, or giving up a specific way of working as it has been traditionally understood.

Research shows that diverse workplaces, for example, fuel innovation. Leaders and employees who understand power sharing, and who have experience breaking down barriers of exclusion, will be positioned to harness that diversity as the strength that it is. Inclusive leaders make better decisions, are better at collaboration, and see better performance and reduced absenteeism among their employees.^{viii}

In addition:

- When companies have strong female leadership on their boards, they show a return on equity of 10.1% annually compared to 7.4% among companies without this leadership.^{ix}
- Companies in the top-quartile for gender diversity on executive teams are 21% more likely to outperform the national average.^x
- When employers embrace disability as part of their recruitment and retention strategy, they realize a 90% increase in retention and a 72% increase in productivity.^{xi}
- LGBTQIA+ inclusive companies attract and retain talented employees and win the loyalty of customers who are socially conscious (a \$3.72 trillion market).^{xii}

- Young employees add to the bottom line by bringing new and innovative ways of thinking about challenges and opportunities, connections to new markets, and ease with which these digital natives adopt and use new technologies.^{xiii}

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Beyond individual institutions, power is embedded in the larger systems that govern all our lives: policies, laws, and institutions. But young people, especially historically marginalized young people, are often excluded from systems of power. Without their voices and decision-making input, policies are made **about** young people, not **with** young people. Further, negative stereotypes of young people and lack of information about their real, lived experiences can lead to policy panic, a phenomenon created when reactionary policies are developed based on misinformation or negative perceptions. In turn, these harmful policies perpetuate even more negative stereotypes of young people in an ongoing, vicious cycle.^{xiv}

What's more, even though there are plenty of stories of young people's advocacy initiatives, and abundant evidence of social change, these stories often don't get the visibility they deserve. Society further marginalizes young people in myriad ways including by discounting their positive contributions and professional accomplishments; positioning them solely as recipients of service or charity rather than advocates and changemakers with agency; tokenizing them; and even ignoring them completely. This maintains a portrait of young people as not-yet-ready for full citizenship or real leadership.

Meaningful youth engagement creates opportunities for young people to be involved in the development of policies on issues that affect their lives. It responds constructively to the challenges of policy panic and tokenism, and supports the creation of more

effective policies in the process. This is the real work of policy-making, and it requires more than tokenistic efforts or superficial attempts to capture young people's contributions. It is a commitment for both young people and their adult allies, and needs to be recognized and appropriately compensated as such. The rewards are worth it, and according to research, they are also long-lasting: meaningful youth engagement leads to adult engagement.^{xvi} Breaking down barriers to participation now also breaks down barriers for the future.

Moving Forward

The demographic dividend, the economic growth potential that results from shifts in the population age structure,² is both a present- and a future-paying return. But that future dividend is not simply about workforce, economics, or increased development. It's about young people's present-day and future contributions toward creating just, sustainable, healthy, inclusive communities. Realizing the demographic dividend requires continuing to push these issues of power from the margins to the center focus of the engagement work done **as** young people or **with** young people.

Breaking down barriers to participation is not just one thing. It involves multiple levels and comprehensive approaches to change. It does not mean bringing in a set quota of young people, and asking them to participate in the **existing** ways of doing things; it does mean changing the cultures of organizations and institutions to make those institutions more fundamentally inclusive.^{xvii}

Creating an inclusive environment means addressing not only the explicit policies, laws, rules, programs, and systems, but also those less obvious but equally powerful cultural beliefs, norms, traditional practices, and attitudes that serve to marginalize young people in general and particular groups of young people even more. Meaningful youth engagement means working across differences of geography, identity, economics,

and yes, age. It requires working vertically from the level of individual and small group to the international arena, and working horizontally across sectors and silos.

Adult allies also have an important role to play in dismantling structures of exclusion. As traditional power holders within a society, they can be important inter-generational partners in breaking down interpersonal, institutional, and/or systemic patterns of bias against young people. Not all adults want to be partners; others want to be partners but don't know how. Some are ready, willing, and able. But even the strongest adult allies can find themselves bumping up against systemic barriers as they partner in this work. Organizational leaders need to know that funding and other resources are important, but so are institutional policies and practices that legitimize and support the work of current and potential adult allies.^{xviii}

It's Time for Change

The evidence is clear: young people can and do drive positive social change, with powerful ripple effects that fuel progress on many levels, in any context. When young people are engaged in meaningful and authentic ways, they share the power and the responsibility for success. They become partners, not just beneficiaries, in a community's health, prosperity, security, and sustainability. Working together with young people to realize their right and desire to engage is not only an opportunity, but an imperative for those who have the courage to challenge inequities, shift power, and drive real progress in solving the world's most pressing issues. To truly enact change for girls and women — and for the world — leaders must reflect, assess, and act today to implement powerful practices of meaningful youth engagement wherever their sphere of influence lies.

Now is the time for change.



As a leading, global advocate for gender equality and the health, rights, and wellbeing of girls and women, Women Deliver brings together diverse voices and interests to drive progress for all, with a particular focus on 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.

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Citations

[1] Women Deliver recognizes that definitions of “youth” and “young people” vary across cultures, contexts, and organizations.

[2] The demographic dividend is broadly understood to mean the economic growth potential that results from shifts in the population age structure to more working age people. The term can also be expanded to include the potential for other social benefits that result from harnessing the power of this age demographic.

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