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Advancing youth participation to achieve gender transformative change

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Introduction

Young people¹ aged 10 to 24 make up one quarter of the world's population. Despite facing various barriers to their participate in leadership and public life, youth from all over the world are consistently showing their ability, determination, and desire to actively challenge established patriarchal systems, social norms and structures and bring about inclusive and innovative social change and to transform current inequalities. The aspirations and achievements of these 1.8 billion young people is shaping the future.

Youth are mobilizing a global movement, both online and offline, to stand against injustice and make their voices heard. They are leading change on the vital global issues that are affecting everyone in the globe like climate change, discrimination, gender-based violence, racism, and exclusion.

Youth engagement and leadership is a prerequisite for accelerating and sustaining progress on preventing and ending violence against women and girls, promoting gender equality, and transforming the social norms in which gender-based violence and discrimination are rooted.

Engaging youth in the prevention of violence against women and girls, and promoting women's participation in public life is critical, as they have the ability to question outdated thinking about gender roles and establish respectful relationships promoting gender equality.

Youth-led gender transformative approach explicitly tackles social norms around gender, power, violence, and attitudes and values around gender roles. This approach do not only focus on social norms, but it is an integrated and multifaceted approach to tackling gender inequality and power relations.² The crucial role of youth in effecting positive transformative change by challenging political and social norms, and addressing stereotypes that perpetuate violence against women and girls, whether through powerful social protests or social media campaigns is vital as part of the global movement.

Barriers youth face include marginalization, intentional exclusion from decision makers on the different levels, political risks, lack of economic participation and opportunities, lack of youth representation in Civil Society organizations and the design of programs and policies, and limited and unequal access to resources, knowledge, information, networks. Youth are underrepresented in the political life, which makes it more difficult for them to elevate their voices and to have their issues and needs prioritized in national and international agendas, in addition to the threat and intimidation they face because of their advocacy efforts. Therefore, youth activists lack the needed space to freely express themselves and to participate in public life. At present, the issue of violations is often discussed without providing any material or moral support to youth. Hence, these limitations prevent youth from gaining valuable experiences and proving themselves as local or national leaders.

On the other hand, youth-led organizations are often small and unfunded, and need support to provide resources that will help them work effectively. Grant-makers are often hesitant to fund youth organizations that may be deemed risky. Yet, youth-focused organizations are especially in need of financial and technical support that will help them leverage their creativity and readiness to work effectively with different allies.

Role of International mechanisms and institutions in advancing youth participation in public life:

¹ The United Nations defines the youth as the individuals in the age group (15-24 years) with the possibility of adjusting this category according to the specificity of each country.

² Fulu, E. Kerr-Wilson, A. and Lang, J. (2014). What works to prevent violence against women and girls? Evidence Review of interventions to prevent violence against women and girls. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-in-preventing-violence-against-women-and-girls-review-of-the-evidence-from-the-programme>

25 years passed after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) by 189 governments in 1995, but still young women and girls continue to be amongst the most marginalized and vulnerable population. This emphasize on the need for the international efforts to be directed towards those facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalization.

Women's participation in public life is highly affected by the discrimination practices starting from the social norms within the family and society, the educational institutions and its patriarchal system that emphasizes on gender roles, and eventually reflected in public life.

Men are usually viewed as the breadwinners of their families and thus more deserving of jobs when competing directly with women. For example, the UN Women's study "Understanding Masculinity"³ which surveyed the social attitudes of men and women in Palestine on different political, economic, and social aspects, revealed that round 83 per cent of men and 70 per cent of women agreed that men's access to work should take priority over women's when such opportunities are scarce.

The study also found that more women (59 per cent of the sample) than men (42 per cent) believed that women should have greater representation in political leadership. However, more than half of women and two-thirds of men agreed that "women are too emotional to be leaders", suggesting mixed views on women's accession to public power.

For young people in all their diversity to actively lead and/or contribute to decision making, they must first be clear about issues that impact them and their communities and must feel empowered to propose and implement solutions. This requires: strong communication between young people, community members and formal decision makers; recognition of young people's right and capacity to contribute to and/or lead community development processes; and strong youth commitment to mobilize and pursue the change they aspire to for themselves and their communities.⁴ (Oxfam Australia Youth Advisors, 2005)

As a recognition of the importance role youth have to advance global gender agenda, on July 14, 2020, the United Nations Security Council adopted its third resolution on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), co-sponsored by France and the Dominican Republic. The UN Security Council encouraged Member States to support and integrate youth into decision-making processes, recognizing their unique role in strengthening the national, local and community-based capacities in conflict and post-conflict situations to prepare for and respond to increasingly frequent, severe weather events and natural hazards, as well as public health challenges that affect young people's life and their future, including the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵

Resolution 2535 (2020) aims to accelerate and strengthen the implementation of the YPS resolutions by institutionalizing the agenda within the UN system and establishing a 2-year reporting mechanism; calling for system-wide protection of youth peacebuilders and activists; emphasizing the urgency of the meaningful participation of youth peacebuilders in decision-making on humanitarian response; and recognizing the synergies between the anniversaries of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (women, peace and security), the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the 5th anniversary of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The UNSCR 2535 is the most action-oriented of the YPS resolutions. It includes specific encouragement to Member States to develop and implement roadmaps on youth, peace and security – with dedicated and sufficient resources. These resources should be intersectional and realistic. This echoes GNWP's long-standing advocacy for adequate resources to support peacebuilding led by women, including young women. Far too often, roadmaps and action plans are developed without dedicated budgets, which limits the implementation of the agenda and meaningful participation of young people in

³ <https://imagesmena.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/03/Understanding-Masculinities-in-Palestine-English.pdf>

⁴ <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621042/dp-youth-theory-of-change-280820-en.pdf;jsessionid=1484B3659509144609601088E01FF44D?sequence=1>

⁵ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14251.doc.htm>

sustaining peace. Furthermore, the resolution encourages dedicated funding for youth-led and youth-focused organizations and emphasizes the institutionalization of the YPS agenda within the UN. This will eliminate additional barriers faced by young people as they are often in precarious work and disadvantaged economically. Young people are expected to provide their skills and experiences as volunteers, which further increases the economic divide and forces many to remain or to live in poverty.

Young people have a role to play in sustaining peace and economic well-being of societies. Thus, it is crucial that they be included in all aspects of design, implementation, and monitoring of economic-focused opportunities and initiatives; especially, now within the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic which has created additional disparities and burdens in the state of the world's economy. The adoption of UNSCR 2535 is an important step towards guaranteeing that.

The recognition by UNSCR 2535 of the complex and multi-layered barriers to youth participation is important to ensure unjust and burdensome practices, imposed to young people and particularly to young women, are eliminated. Supportive systems must be prioritized to ensure the success of local youth initiatives who contribute to the overall progress and good of societies.

The resolution calls on Member States to recognize and promote synergies between the Women, Peace and Security (WPS); and Youth, Peace and Security agendas – including the 20th Anniversary of UNSCR 1325 (women, peace and security) and the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. (Leclerc, 2020)

Role of Civil Society Organization in advancing youth inclusion in decision making

Civil society, particularly women and youth activists and peacebuilders, have long called for greater synergies between WPS and YPS agendas as many of the barriers and challenges faced by women and youth are part of the same exclusionary cultures. The discrimination, marginalization and violence girls and young women experience often continue to adulthood, unless enabling conditions are created for their empowerment. On the other hand, girls and young women who have strong support from family, school and other social institutions are better equipped to realize their full potentials as adults.

the Core Group of the GEF recognized Civil Society networks⁶ call for stronger synergies between WPS and YPS in the processes around the Generation Equality Forum (GEF) with the development of the Compact Coalition on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action within the Beijing+25 review process. While the name of the Compact does not include YPS, the inclusion of young women in decision-making has been highlighted in the Compact's concept note.

Women's organizations have been working hard since the onset of the crisis to provide women with the services and protection they need. This includes free 24-hour helpline services, psychosocial support, and e-counseling, as well as carrying out media interventions and awareness campaigns on GBV. Vast majority of women's organizations reported an increase in their caseloads since the start of the lockdown, and they are utilizing all the available resources to meet the increased needs. However, they are still not capable of providing some needed services because the social services on the official level have broken down, and the courts have shut down.

Aside from the negative implications of COVID-19 on civil society organizations (CSOs), the crisis was an opportunity for organizations and networks to rethink of and redesign their collective working approach as a synergetic movement. Addressing and tackling the implications of the crisis has been done more in a collective approach, emphasizing the importance of bringing together as many organizations and networks as possible to ensure complementary rather than competitive engagement. Funding for women's organizations is mostly lacking because donor funding priorities

⁶ An example is Global Network of Women Peacebuilders

have shifted towards providing humanitarian aid since the beginning of the crisis. Yet, women's organizations have mobilized their internal resources to design and implement joint campaigns and deliver emergency responses to help affected women and girls.

Women's organizations developed their reporting systems and focused on collecting and classifying data related to the gendered impact of COVID-19 into different themes, including women in humanitarian response activities, gender-based violence, violence against women and girls, COVID-19's economic impact on women, and women living under occupation and conflict. Classified data and statistics have helped policy makers, legislators, and international organizations, including UN agencies, to better respond to the needs of the society in general, and women in particular, and to tackle the implications of the crisis on different sectors.

Youth at the center of the collective response to Covid-19 crisis

Since the onset of COVID-19 crisis, the population has experienced increased family care burdens and increased family violence as a result of being quarantined in unsafe homes with violent spouses and family members. The shutdown of schools and daycare centers that entails the need to cope with the newly introduced online education, the intensified impact of patriarchy while being confined to the home, gender stereotypes and stigma, many incidents of job loss among women working in the informal sector, the unavailability or insufficiency of food and medicine, the lack of protection and support provided by governments, and the breakdown of social services are all factors that disproportionately increase the impact of the pandemic on women and girls, especially those living in the context of conflicts and occupation.

While COVID19 has been a global crisis, it has had a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups, including women, youth and children, exacerbating existing inequalities. Unfolding in a region already dealing with revolutions, conflicts and instability, the crisis has made complex environments even more challenging. Young women activists have been fighting against multiple layers of oppression, and continue to experience exclusion, injustice, discrimination. They find themselves today with ever more complex challenges and realities, with limited possibilities and opportunities to make their voices heard. Crisis responses in many countries have been blind to the ways young women are affected differently than other generations and groups. These responses are failing to deal with the unprecedented economic, social, health and educational crisis associated with the pandemic, which will ultimately undermine young women and girls' security, autonomy, well-being and futures. It is imperative at this critical time to acknowledge that young women and girls do not have the opportunity to apply a feminist lens to their leadership, and to provide a forum for them to do so, as well as ensuring their meaningful participation towards a gender responsive, intergenerational and intersectional approaches to crisis responses.

Despite the limited capacities and resources available on the governmental and civil-society levels, youth have been working hard to narrow the existing gaps. Since the beginning of the crisis, women and youth organizations and youth activists have been tackling the implications of the COVID-19 crisis on marginalized groups, especially women and girls. This includes documenting and monitoring its impact on women and girls during quarantine and lockdown and responding to the increased needs of women and girls, especially for protection, by promptly providing services. They are amplifying women's voices in the public sphere and holding accountable duty bearers to ensure the respect of women's rights; they are showcasing the resilience of women and youth during the crisis and highlighting their innovative coping strategies to deal with the harsh circumstances. Youth-led media organizations are also combating the online campaigns that incite against women, provoking increased violence against women and stigmatizing women and girls, in addition to increased online blackmailing and violence.

Many available opportunities for youth, women, feminists, women's rights defenders, and women's organizations and movements have been overlooked and lack appropriate attention. It is critical to emphasize youth's achievements during this time of crisis and acknowledge their pivotal role in tackling its implications on the leadership and societal levels.

Media and popular culture play an enormous role in perpetuating gender stereotypes and sustaining gender conformity. The blatant misogyny, sexual aggression, gender stereotypes, inciting against women, and misinformation is a defining characteristic of much of media and social media content, promoting a culture of gendered violence. As a response, youth activists are increasingly using social media to end violence and discrimination against women.

Case study:

In response to the exacerbation of violence against women and girls, and the lack of accurate, reliable and up-to-date information on the gendered impact of COVID-19 in the Arab region, a taskforce of 300 young volunteers from across Arab states joined [HerStory](#)¹ initiative, supported by UN Women, to monitor mass and social media, gather stories of the gender impact of the pandemic, and track occurrences of misinformation and harmful gender stereotyping.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, volunteers have been documenting reports of misinformation as well as collecting news concerning the COVID-19 impact on women's livelihoods, women in humanitarian contexts, violence against women and girls during emergencies and the contribution of women supporting emergency response.

Volunteers update Arabic Wikipedia articles about COVID-19 to provide simple and accurate information on how to prevent COVID-19 at the local level. They also organize and participating in training sessions to raise the awareness on gender issues and COVID-19, and to counter fake news and dismantle harmful gender stereotypes in the media. Since the beginning of media monitoring in mid-March, over 600 stories, articles and information pieces from news outlets and social media have been documented. The outcome database will be used to inform program interventions to combat harmful stereotyping of women and men, and to address misinformation around COVID-19 and its impacts on women and girls. (UN Women, 2020)

Youth are experts on their environment and culture, and are essential to developing relevant, engaging, and effective strategies. To access the power of youth leaders, there is a need for engaging youth from marginalized communities to be part of an intergenerational collaborative which may include racially and ethnically diverse youth, Native American youth, LGBTQ youth, youth with disabilities, youth from marginalized religions, youth who are undocumented, and youth who are refugees. This would result in a sustainable youth movement that would provide a space for young leaders to empower each other, and to create an interconnected dialogue that addresses gender issues. (OUR GENDER REVOLUTION)

Case Study:

In an effort to ensure young people's inclusivity and representation in the core process of promoting gender equality, and contributing to all stages of the global review process and the generation equality campaign, UN Women launched "[Beijing+25 Youth Task Force](#)". This task force comprises 30 young leaders from different youth-led and youth-serving organizations, with diverse areas of expertise and from all regions of the world. They represent young people in all their diversity and across intersectional complexities including marital status, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, indigenous and ethnic identities, and refugee or migrant status. All members have a track record of driving change in their communities and mobilizing young people for the empowerment of young women and girls all over the world.

The youth leaders work closely with UN Women to support its efforts to place young people at the centre of the Beijing+25 process; be part of a network of young supporters that will foster momentum on youth engagement for gender equality on a global level; and exchange expertise and knowledge with other young people that are working towards the same goals.

UN Women has launched a global campaign, Generation Equality, to mark the 25th anniversary of Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, to tackle the gaps of achieving gender equality and women's empowerment everywhere. This is implemented by bringing together the wider and younger generations of women's rights activists with the gender equality advocates and visionaries who were instrumental in creating the Beijing Platform for Action more than two decades ago.

It's time to develop and implement gender-transformative approaches on the CSO and government levels. The crisis has revealed the fragility of the existing programs and policies and their limited ability to respond to the needs of vulnerable groups. The gender narrative has focused on the dark sides of the crisis, but it's time also to show the sides of engagement, prosperity, and positive change. Youth played an important role in bridging the existing gaps on the societal, institutional and national levels.

Youth are generally more involved as participants in awareness-raising activities organized by CSOs, which aim to increase public awareness on gender-based violence and discrimination. Through their participation, youth gain advocacy skills, increase their confidence and capacity to be engaged in the design and planning process of the awareness campaigns. This allow youth to build multi-stakeholders networks and enable them to implement community mobilization through involvement in social and political activities, which eventually contribute to increasing their participation in decision-making processes in public life.

Through their activism, youth have been able to take part in committees, councils, platforms taskforces, and networks on national, regional and international levels, which widen their potential and lead them to take on significant roles to initiate positive change. Such engagement needs a change of the social, institutional and governmental attitudes towards youth capability of leading the change.

For young people to influence formal and informal institutions and social norms, opportunities and safe spaces must exist for them to meaningfully engage with decision-makers and promote their agendas. Leaders must be motivated to work with young people and see the value of youth inclusion. In turn, young people must build an understanding of the social norms, policies and practices that impact their leadership, engagement and participation. Youth Leadership helps young people look beyond their personal needs and interests to see their relationship and responsibility to a collective group, organization, and community. Youth Development encompasses and extends beyond young people's basic needs for stable homes, services, and schooling. This approach focuses on additional supports in the form of relationships and networks that provide nurturing standards, and guidance, as well as opportunities for trying new roles and contributing to family and community.⁷

If youth-led groups and networks do not collaborate with leaders in communities and institutions, it is less likely that transformational change will occur at multiple levels. Leaders from youth groups, communities and institutions must therefore work together in strategic alliances towards a shared vision.

Youth activists have the energy and time to transform behaviors but need to have access to funds at the local level to increase their capacity to propose and implement concrete and practical solutions. National Action Plans (NAPs) must reflect the youth's perspectives and be innovative to end violence against women and girls by explicitly recognizing their important roles in leading the change. NAPs also need to reference young people and champion the powerful role they can play in building peace, preventing conflict, advocating and advancing human rights and breaking the cycles of violence.

Many actions need to be implemented to end violence against women and girls, notably: aligning all laws and legislations with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), in particular the penal code, personal status laws and family protection laws, increasing budget allocation for women's machineries and ensure gender-responsive budgeting, mainstreaming gender within school curricula so that elements of gender discrimination is not

⁷ https://www.idvsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/OGR_Social-Change-to-End-Gender-Violence-guide.pdf

inherently written into school books and syllabus. Similarly, provide gender sensitization training to educators so that discriminatory stereotypes are not perpetuated in the classroom, improving the referral systems for survivors for better technical solutions and procedures to make the process easier, quicker, more transparent, more equitable and less costly, engaging men and boys in, programs, policies and advocacy campaigns, providing safe spaces for youth and recognize their role in ending violence against women and girls and building a better coordination system between youth local organizations, governments, and international organizations to ensure synergies and effectiveness.

Youth Civic Engagement supports young people in developing the skills and habits needed to create compassionate communities. This approach places unique emphasis on engaging young people in a democratic process, both within organizations and within the broader community.

It is an important priority to channel the energy, passion, and commitment of young people into leadership roles to sustain and grow their effort. Young people themselves need to have a say in what leadership means to them. To achieve large-scale transformative and sustainable change, young people must also develop strategic alliances with different stakeholders and create ways to meaningfully influence power holders, communities and institutions. This requires the building of trust and confidence in the capabilities of youth at the grassroots level, in particular young women. Even in civil society organizations, which are supposed to promote women's inclusion, young women are often marginalized from the decision-making process at both the national and international levels, including lobbying and advocacy.

Tal3at:

“There is no free homeland without free women” reverberated across Palestinian communities in September 2019 when thousands of Palestinian women took to the streets in 12 villages, towns and cities across the world in what was the launch of Tal’at, a Palestinian feminist movement. *Tal’at* means stepping out in Arabic.

Choosing the streets as their space of struggle, marchers raised their voices against gender-based violence in all its manifestations: femicide, domestic violence, embedded sexism and exploitation, asserting that the path to true liberation must embody the emancipation of each and every Palestinian, including women.

This was the first time in recent history that Palestinian women took action under an explicitly political and feminist banner. It has succeeded in mobilizing Palestinians across their fragmented geographies. The catalyst was the killing of [Israa Ghrayeb](#), a 21-year-old Palestinian woman from Bethlehem. Israa was brutally beaten by family members in August 2019. This global movement was established and organized by young women, to challenge violence, exclusion, and occupation, unifying their voices under one key message: *the safety and dignity of women in Palestine is not a women-only issue, but one that must be at the core of our emancipatory politics in discourse and action, for there is no free homeland without free women.*

Youth mobilization to end violence against women

In March 2019, 44 youth activists representing 14 countries in the Arab States region attended the first-ever Regional Youth Workshop on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in the Arab States.

Co-convened by UN Women and UNFPA regional offices for the Arab States, with the generous support of the Government of Japan, the workshop brought together youth from across the region to discuss key priorities and identify challenges in addressing violence against women in the Arab States.

The regional workshop provided youth with a space to discuss and identify entry points for their engagement in addressing violence against women and develop the [Youth Call to Action to End Violence Against Women and Girls in the Arab States](#), which stipulates regional priorities, recommendations and responsibilities to address violence against women.

The Call to Action focuses on a set of priorities and strategies to address violence against women and girls and can be used as a resource to raise awareness on, and advocate for, gender equality and women's empowerment by youth networks and organizations in the Arab States, and to guide the

development of programmes and initiatives to end violence against women and girls in the region. Benefitting from the insights and aspirations of the youth participants to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) by the year 2030, the Call to Action provides a set of recommendations to explore, address, and develop available policy and legislative frameworks, coordination and knowledge management, attitudes and behaviors for social change, and access to services by women and girls' survivors of violence.⁸

Recommendations:

- International organisations are to engage more effectively with young people, to achieve a transformative approach through:
 - Mobilizing international support to advocate for the causes of youth and support their representation international forums, especially young women.
 - Support and funding the activities of raising awareness about human rights resolutions, lobbying and advocacy activities and investing in programs which target youth.
 - Effectively engaging youth in the various provisions, documents and decisions related to women, peace and security.
 - Promoting lobbying and advocacy capacities among youth by providing them with political support, funding and training.
- Governments must adopt a more gender-transformative approach in the policy making and decision-making processes to promote youth especially young women's effective participation in national and international platforms
- Providing safe spaces for youth to gather and share experiences and give them opportunities to speak with their own voice.
- National support is needed for grassroots infrastructure to build youth movement movements.
- CSOs must provide youth networks, organizations, and activists with technical assistance and opportunities to develop partnerships and expand their networks and initiatives.
- National for national programs and policies that provide young activists especially young women with the advocacy tools, protection strategies, and outreach platform to strengthen their efforts are needed
- Organized platforms are needed to initiate intergenerational dialogue that brings together young activists, CSOs and political leaders.

⁸ <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/5/youth-call-to-action-to-evaw-in-the-arab-states>