

FROM COMMITMENTS TO ACCOUNTABILITY: PATHWAYS FROM A YOUTH & WOMEN-LED DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The experiences shared through the **Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN)** survey demonstrate that young women and girls are not only stakeholders in gender equality efforts—they are essential architects of sustainable peace, justice, and inclusive governance. However, the data make clear that existing systems continue to exclude youth from the decision-making structures that shape policies affecting their lives. In the context of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70) and global commitments to gender equality, these findings underscore the urgent need for governments and international institutions to move beyond consultation toward institutionalized youth participation at all levels of policy design, implementation, and accountability.

Youth Transforming Narratives, therefore, calls for targeted policy action to strengthen youth political participation, expand access to justice and sexual and reproductive health and rights, invest in education and leadership pipelines for young women, and integrate youth leadership into peacebuilding and social cohesion initiatives.

Embedding youth leadership within these policy frameworks is essential to ensuring that gender equality commitments translate into durable systems that support the rights, safety, and leadership of women and girls - particularly those living in conflict-affected and marginalized communities.

CONTEXT

26
Respondents
Aged 18 -35
Women

Working in:

- Civil society
- Research
- Advocacy
- Programme coordination

Geographically diverse:

- Latin America & the Caribbean
- Sub-Saharan Africa
- Europe & Central Asia
- Asia-Pacific
- MENA
- North America

Most hold **Master's degrees** and are **actively engaged** - at least occasionally - **in civil society or informal public life.**

The information was gathered through a semi-structured survey distributed internally amongst the global YTN Team. The survey resulted in 98% female responses and 2% male responses aged between 18 and 35.

REWRITING THE NARRATIVE: FINDINGS FROM SIX REGIONS

“Young women are ready to lead - but systems continue to limit their participation in political and policy decision-making.”

A Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN) survey highlighted persistent structural barriers that limit young women’s participation in governance and public life. Respondents represent a diverse group of young women working in civil society, advocacy, and research across multiple regions. Despite being highly educated and actively engaged in policy spaces, many still face significant obstacles to leadership and participation. As one key insights from the survey reflects,

Access to justice emerged as a central concern across responses. Many participants described legal systems that remain difficult to navigate and insufficiently responsive to women’s rights and safety. Barriers to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) were also frequently highlighted, limiting both personal autonomy and broader civic participation. Respondents emphasized that ‘access to justice and rights-based services remains uneven and inaccessible for many young women and girls.’ These findings reinforce global evidence that gender equality cannot be achieved without strengthening institutional protections, expanding legal access, and ensuring survivor-centered responses to gender-based violence.

Political participation remains uneven across many contexts. While respondents reported growing opportunities for youth engagement, many noted that participation often remains symbolic. Young people are frequently invited to consultations but excluded from agenda-setting, policy design, and implementation processes. As respondents emphasized, ‘youth participation must move beyond consultation to co-creation.’ Meaningful engagement requires young people to be included not only in dialogue but also in decision-making and accountability mechanisms.

Education and leadership development were consistently identified as critical pathways for expanding participation. Respondents highlighted the importance of mentorship, leadership training, and inclusive education systems that equip young women with the skills and networks needed to engage in governance processes. As the survey findings underscore, ‘education and mentorship are critical pathways to leadership.’ Investments in these areas help ensure that young women can transition from civic engagement to positions of influence.

Participants also emphasized the importance of youth-led peacebuilding and community initiatives in strengthening social cohesion. Grassroots initiatives were frequently described as spaces where young women can address discrimination, gender-based violence, and community tensions. These experiences demonstrate the broader role that youth leadership can play in advancing inclusive governance and sustainable peace.

Overall, the findings reveal a consistent pattern across regions and sectors. Young women are already engaged in civic and policy spaces, yet the institutional systems surrounding them remain uneven, under-resourced, or exclusionary. Respondents made clear that the solution is not greater visibility alone. Instead, they called for stronger accountability mechanisms, reliable institutional support, and sustained investment in youth leadership. These priorities reflect the broader objectives of the Commission on the Status of Women and underscore the need to translate global gender equality commitments into practical, enforceable change for women and girls.

YOUTH REPORT CARD: AN ASSESSMENT OF OUR REALITY

United Nations Member State Agreed Policy Commitments					
Policy Theme	Assessment	Key Patterns Identified			
Youth Political Participation	Symbolic & Unequal	Youth engagement remains tokenistic, donor-driven, and disconnected from decision-making power	The Secretary-General's CSW70 report identifies rising authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, armed conflict, and shrinking civic space as direct structural threats to women's participation (paras. 9, 14, 27). CSW70 frames political repression, surveillance, intimidation, and institutional capture as governance failures that systematically obstruct women's leadership and justice access (paras. 14, 27).		
Policy & Accountability	Weak Implementation	Strong global legal frameworks but weak enforcement; fragmented accountability; limited political will; chronic underfinancing	CSW65 Agreed Conclusions acknowledge persistent implementation gaps due to insufficient political commitment, weak accountability mechanisms, and inadequate resourcing (E/2021/27, para. 12). They further call on States to strengthen accountability mechanisms, monitoring, financing, transparency, and enforcement (paras. 21, 29(f)). The CSW70 Secretary-General's report confirms persistent enforcement failures and financing gaps undermining SDG 5.5 progress (E/CN.6/2026/3, paras. 31, 33).		
Access to Justice as Implementation Pathway	Structural Enforcement Gap	Justice systems remain inaccessible, exclusionary, slow, politicized, and discriminatory	CSW70 Priority Theme establishes access to justice as a precondition for women's and girls' full participation in public life (para. 6), while identifying structural, legal, and institutional barriers that prevent accountability, especially in fragile and shrinking civic spaces (para. 17). It further mandates strengthening independent, accessible, and gender-responsive justice systems as foundational to democratic governance and leadership (para. 22).		
Optimism Toward SDG 5.5	Cautiously Pessimistic	Democratic backsliding, conflict, economic shocks, shrinking civic space	The Secretary-General's CSW70 report identifies rising authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, armed conflict, and shrinking civic space as direct structural threats to women's participation (paras. 9, 14, 27).		
Governance & Political Environment	High Risk	Surveillance, repression, militarization, political intimidation	CSW70 frames political repression, surveillance, intimidation, and institutional capture as governance failures that systematically obstruct women's leadership and justice access (paras. 14, 27).		
Financing & Institutional Capacity	Critically Insufficient	Chronic underinvestment, donor dependency, weak domestic financing	CSW65 and CSW70 emphasize underfinancing as a structural barrier to implementation, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings (E/CN.6/2026/3, para. 31) and warn that without sustained domestic and international financing, SDG 5.5 progress will remain reversible (para. 33).		

FOUR CRITICAL RECOMMENDATIONS GROUNDED IN GLOBAL YOUTH EXPERIENCES

Adopting this framework creates a strategic opening for youth-led advocacy to shift from representation-based engagement toward systemic accountability, governance reform, and multilateral political pressure. Therefore, we recommend:

Recommendation 1: Youth must be embedded as accountability actors, not symbolic participants - particularly in treaty monitoring, CSW reporting, and SDG review processes. We urge the UN Women-Normative Support Division to integrate measurable compliance benchmarks into the CSW70 Agreed Conclusions and to develop a standardized gender implementation accountability framework for Member States. OHCHR & the CEDAW Committee should institutionalize formal recognition of youth shadow reports within treaty body review cycles and strengthen follow-up procedures with time-bound enforcement tracking. UNDP's Governance & Rule of Law programming to support Member States to establish independent gender equality oversight bodies and provide technical assistance for enforcement monitoring systems.

Member States must establish independent enforcement commissions with youth representation and attach mandatory implementation budgets to all gender equality legislation.

Recommendation 2: Justice reform must be treated as an enabler of political participation - without bodily autonomy and legal access, youth leadership cannot be realized. YTN's policy team requests that UN Women & UNFPA expand technical assistance to repeal discriminatory SRHR laws and support survivor-centered justice mechanisms. We encourage UNDP's Rule of Law Unit to integrate gender-responsive justice indicators into governance reform programming and fund youth-accessible legal aid systems. OHCHR should aim to strengthen monitoring of restrictive legal frameworks that undermine bodily autonomy. The Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) must embed justice reform into post-conflict stabilization funding.

Member States must decriminalize laws restricting access to SRHR and establish youth-accessible legal aid and complaint mechanisms by removing procedural and financial barriers to access to courts.

Recommendation 3: Youth must move from a stakeholder to an institutional actor status within governance systems. The UN Youth Office should meaningfully institutionalize youth co-decision models within UN governance consultations. UNDP's Democratic Governance unit can support Member States in embedding youth representation within electoral and constitutional reform bodies. Additionally, DPPA must integrate youth leadership into political transition and mediation processes, while CSW Bureau works to formalize youth delegation participation in drafting processes.

Member States must establish statutory youth advisory councils with binding consultative authority, and guarantee youth seats on constitutional review commissions to institutionalize youth inclusion in National Action Plans (WPS/YPS) for meaningful, sustainable peace.

Recommendation 4: Leadership must be cultivated as public infrastructure, not as a short-term project intervention. UNESCO can ensure this by expanding civic education and democratic literacy programming for UN Women to use as an investment tool in leadership training for young women in governance sectors. UNDP should seek to support public administration fellowships targeting youth from marginalized communities for UNICEF to integrate legal literacy and civic education into secondary education systems through localized programming.

Member States must fund inclusive leadership academies linked to public institutions that embed civic education within national curricula and actively work to remove financial barriers to access to higher education for young women.

Youth leadership is not auxiliary to peacebuilding — it is core governance stabilization infrastructure. If youth are excluded from decision-making today, the systems that currently protect women and girls globally will not endure.

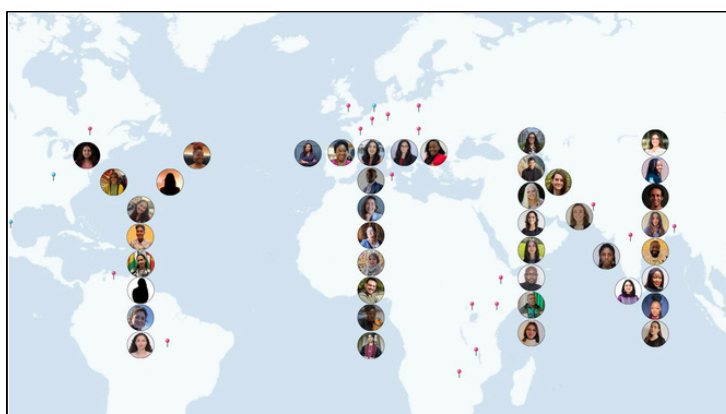
Institutional inclusion at the decision-making level is necessary now to:

- Uphold inclusiveness through democratic processes;
- Protect civic space;
- Sustain justice reforms;
- Ensure continuity of support to the most vulnerable women and girls globally.

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