

## **YCSRR Input for the OHCHR Study on Youth and Human Rights**

### **Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (YCSRR)**

The Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights is an international youth-led organization (15-29 years) committed to ensuring that the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all adolescents and young people are respected, guaranteed and promoted. The Youth Coalition works to secure the meaningful participation of young people in decision-making that affects their lives by advocating, generating knowledge, sharing information, building partnerships and training young activists.

Our membership is represented by youth activists from most parts of the world, and this document focuses on a few country-specific examples, in response to the call for input on youth and human rights. Herein, we aim to provide input on problems that we encounter in our countries and make general recommendations for future consideration. Focus countries include Bolivia, Pakistan, South Africa, Turkey, and Uganda.

#### **1. Problem Statement on Youth & Human Rights**

##### **Bolivia**

There is few legally established youth-led organizations. Registration fees for youth organizations is as high as the registration fee for large, international NGOs. For this reason, many youth organizations prefer not to legally register which implies more difficulties at the time of trying to access to funds, etc. There is so much tokenism in youth participation.

A few years ago the new national law on youths have been approved and a new Plurinational Direction on Youth has been created. Also, a Plurinational Council of Youth and a Intersectoral Committee on Youth Policies was created. One of the main and important successes of the Committee was the approval of a national plan to prevent adolescent pregnancy, which is under slow implementation. Unfortunately the Council is dominated by youth organizations allied with political parties, so it was not able to work according to its mandate. The Plurinational Direction on Youth has very limited budget but tries to support youth organizations.

Youth organizations are not really involved in developing or implementing policies. The Council was supposed to facilitate that process, but never happened.

##### **Pakistan**

All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law. It prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, religion, language or sex be it men, women or children but *do not* address discrimination based on gender identity and/or expression and sexual orientation. It is a concern that despite Pakistan being a signatory to the aforementioned treaties, comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation has not been adopted to guarantee fundamental rights, equal opportunities and protection to gender and sexual minorities.

Lack of awareness and information about SRHR is the most significant barrier to young people's health and wellbeing due to which many young people rely on informal sources for information on sexuality and sexual health.

Transgender people, particularly transwomen/hijras and other marginalized minorities, face discrimination and stigma in seeking health care services and information as most health agents are not trained about transgender issues and their unique needs.

Discrimination against gender and sexual minorities, particularly transgender people, hinders access to educational institutes and employment opportunities, coupled with a lack of inclusive facilities in public and private institutes. The regulatory provincial bodies for higher education emphasize equal access to education, however, access of gender minorities remains restricted due to absence of anti-discrimination policies and inclusive admission procedures in addition to discriminatory hiring practices. The absence of redress mechanisms and limited access to judicial bodies exacerbates such discrimination.

Early age marriage is highly prevalent in Pakistan that often result in early pregnancy, which can result in high risk of maternal mortality and morbidity, multiple miscarriages and malnutrition (mineral and calorie deficiency) in young mothers and also impedes their social and economic growth.

Sexual exploitation and abuse of adolescents and children is widespread social problem across the country . In the last few years, the problem of child and adolescent sexual abuse has begun to be monitored and publicized by non-governmental organizations as well as mainstream media. However, adequate legal remedies to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation are minimal.

A low level of awareness of HIV/AIDS in young people remains prevalent despite of the fact that young boys, especially, are exposed to all of the risks associated with HIV/AIDS, including the risk of infection.

## **South Africa**

Although the country has progressive laws and policies on public participation, active citizenry and reproductive justice, there is poor implementation. Not a lot of young people are aware of these progressive rights, and do not have information translated to their contexts and realities. These results in young people's rights being violated without them knowing. E.g. young

women/femmes being chased away from clinics when seeking abortion or contraception, or the stigmatising and problematization on young LGBTIQ+ persons.

The number of young black trans women /lesbian/non-conforming youth that are being murdered because of how they identify, with limited to no actions towards justice is another one of the greatest challenges. The justice system is not sensitive to gender dynamics and yet the country is said to be one of the most progressive in Africa with regards to the recognition of sexual rights. So young people die as a result of hate crime, and that usually goes unaddressed.

National Government does not have programmes that are actively engaging young people in law and policy implementation processes, nor do they have one that gives comprehensive information on the rights of youth as citizens. It is organisations like Youth Lab (which is youth-led). Africa Unite and ACTIVATE! Change Drivers (which is youth-centered) that provide platforms of learning about the recognition and exercising of one's rights.

Most youth organisations (such as the ones listed above) do accountability work and sometimes sit and consult in various government offered positions (e.g. the ACTIVATE! Change Drivers Network sits in the Parliamentary Working Group on implementing the National Youth Policy. Although this is the case, at times it is just tokenism because there is very minimal engagement in these platforms). Some youth-led organisations do a lot of work to educate and conscientise about human rights.

## **Turkey**

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute of 2015, in Turkey there are approximately 13 million young people between the ages 15-24, which makes up to 16.4% of the total population in Turkey. Despite its large youth population, the Republic of Turkey has not developed a comprehensive national plan to address and mainstream youth and human rights issues in the country. In the absence of such a framework and a national plan, young people's rights and needs are either forgotten or marginalized by policymakers.

For example, despite Turkey's alignment with several international agreements (CEDAW, Istanbul Convention, etc.), until today there are no programs on Comprehensive Sexuality Education and Youth Friendly Services in Turkey. Young people in Turkey are not only deprived from their right to accurate and scientific information, but as a consequence, also from access to inclusive and non-judgemental health services that would meet their needs on the ground. This situation create extra barriers for young people, as well as for marginalized communities like LGBTQ or refugee youth. Relatedly, increased privatisation of available SRHR services limit young people's access to health.

Further to that, young people are often seen as beneficiaries of services and policies and not included in policy design and implementation. In this regard, there are very few independent youth-led organizations who work to formulate claims and advocate for youth and human rights. Within this framework, sexual and reproductive rights of young people are often not addressed by advocacy groups, and there are only few youth-led organizations working on the issue.

Furthermore, as a result of the Syrian crisis, Turkey hosts a significant number of refugees whose number is estimated to reach 3 million. It is noted that more than half of these groups are women and children (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2017). Currently, humanitarian relief programs rarely embrace youth and often does not address their sexual and reproductive health and rights. There is an urgent necessity to address the needs of the refugee youth in different policy areas, and in particular with regard to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

## **Uganda**

In Uganda there is a lack of meaningful youth participation in decision making such as in policy formulation and also in legal systems, especially for adolescents who are not engaged in such processes . This results in young people who are not engaged with their policies, and do not know their rights, and these could also weaken movements and activism, as well as other human rights defending work.

Another challenge is the limitation of the access to healthcare for LGBTIQ+ persons due to the stigma and discrimination in health facilities and also the lack of awareness on sexual orientation and gender identity to medical staff.

There is also harmful cultural practices for example female genital mutilation, breast ironing which affects the bodies of young girls as they are not allowed to consent to it. This denies the right to bodily integrity and autonomy.

## **2. General Recommendations**

Despite the different context in each of above mentioned countries, several cross-cutting phenomenon loom large, calling for further action. In light of these problem statements, we recommend following points to be considered:

- **Recognizing diversity of young people:**

In addressing youth, governments and organizations should develop a comprehensive and inclusive approach to recognize the diversity of young people and their needs across the world. In this regard, positive action is necessary to fight against stigma and marginalization of LGBTQ youth, refugees, indigenous peoples, etc. Recognizing diversity of young people, comprehensive programs should be developed and implemented to meet the needs and demands of different communities in a culturally relevant, age-appropriate, and gender-sensitive way.

- **Fostering meaningful youth participation:**

As young activists working on human rights, we often encounter tokenism with regard to young people's advocacy work. Seeing this as one of the major problems, we encourage actions fostering meaningful youth participation. We believe that it is important to change perceptions and recognize young people not as mere beneficiaries, but as change-makers who should be involved every stage of policy-making. We would like to highlight that it is also important to address the potential of youth-led organizations to achieve this aim. In order to foster meaningful youth participation, governments and international organizations should take actions in encouraging and supporting youth-led organizations.

- **Mainstreaming youth in policy making:**

As elaborated above, despite the relative access to international and national advocacy spaces, we are often confronted with the marginalization of our demands. Young people should not be left behind. Therefore, it is important to mainstream youth and human rights in policy-making. Young peoples' rights should be integral party to all policy areas, including sexual and reproductive rights.