

CLAIMING POWER IN SOLIDARITY: Young People Leading the SRHR Agenda

editorial

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spotlight

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YOUNG PEOPLE'S SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN THE ASIA AND THE PACIFIC REGION: *Lessons, Way Forward, and Action Agenda*

Of the world's 1.8 billion adolescents and young people aged 10–24 years, nearly one billion live in the Asia-Pacific region.¹ Despite this demographic significance, the political and policy response to young people's needs has been disproportionately limited. Young people, in all their diversity, continue to be excluded from decision-making spaces and face shrinking civic space, digital censorship, authoritarian crackdowns, and increasing backlash against sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).²

Thirty years have passed since the adoption of the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) in 1995—the first United Nations action plan dedicated to young people. WPAY identified priority areas essential to youth well-being, including education, health (including sexual and reproductive health), gender equality, employment, and intergenerational equity.³ The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) further emphasised young people as partners in development and called for advancing their SRHR as integral to sustainable development.

The Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) has worked with youth-led and youth-serving organisations to build the next generation of movement leaders and to ensure that young people's priorities, particularly

related to SRHR, are meaningfully represented in regional and global policy spaces.

Early successes emerged through ARROW's Women's Health and Rights Advocacy Partnership (WHRAP) Southeast Asia, which by 2010 had reached more than 34,000 marginalised young people across Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Lao PDR, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. These included young women living with HIV, migrant and factory workers, young people living in urban poverty, girls from ethnic minority communities, and those affected by religious extremism. WHRAP-SEA advocacy contributed to concrete gains: free access to SRH services for young women in Siem Reap Province, local budget allocations for youth SRH services, culturally relevant CSE curricula in border areas, and agreements with factory management in Hanoi allowing young workers to attend SRHR sessions without wage deductions.

ARROW continued investing in youth leadership across South Asia and the Global South, including regional youth-led monitoring of ICPD implementation across Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa. These efforts strengthened youth capacities in evidence generation, monitoring frameworks, and rights-based advocacy contributing to progressive outcomes at the ICPD+20 milestone.

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The initiative Building the Next Generation of Movement Leaders and Organisations in South Asia for Young People's SRHR enabled eight youth-led organisations in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal to play catalytic roles in national advocacy on youth SRHR, including comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). Capacity strengthening focused on sexuality, gender, CSE, and rights-based advocacy. Several of these organisations later became national partners in the global Right Here Right Now (RHRN) programme, with ARROW and Rutgers investing further to strengthen them as country-level grant managers—signaling a deliberate shift of power to youth leadership.

Between 2015 and 2025, ARROW's role as a regional consortium partner in the RHRN partnership, led by Rutgers, enabled outreach to young people at unprecedented scale. By the end of 2024, more than 52 million young people—both online and offline in Asian and African region—had accessed SRHR information and resources in Asia and Africa region through the programme.⁴ RHRN's end evaluation confirms its contribution to strengthening youth leadership, policy influence, and systems change across diverse political and cultural contexts.⁵

In Asia, ARROW—together with UNESCAP and regional partners—has co-organised the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) Youth Forum since 2017. Over 11,000 young people from across the Asia-Pacific region have participated over eight years, using the Asia-Pacific forum as a critical civic space to engage on SRHR, gender equality, and sustainable development.

Working with partners in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Nepal, ARROW has contributed to advancing youth SRHR across ten countries in Asia and Africa.⁶ The impact spans local, national, regional, and global levels—amplifying youth voice, leadership, and accountability in SRHR and sustainable development processes.

Country Experiences: Seeds of Change.

The Seeds of Change articles in this edition demonstrate how youth-led coalitions are transforming SRHR norms and policies. The edition showcases impact of our work in the region over the years.

In Indonesia, RHRN coalition advocacy contributed to a paradigm shift on SRHR. Youth-led coalitions such as Aliansi Inklusi Jombang (AIJ) directly influenced the adoption of Peraturan Bupati Jombang No. 103/2023 on Reproductive Health, which mandates youth participation in policymaking, institutionalises youth capacity-building, and establishes a multi-sectoral SRHR forum at the regency level.

In Bangladesh, young people have demonstrated resilience amid stigma, misinformation, and backlash from anti-rights actors. Youth-led advocacy with local governments has prioritised menstrual health in schools and communities. Young people are also monitoring health facilities to improve access to youth-friendly SRHR services, asserting accountability at the local level.

In Nepal, youth advocacy has contributed to making health education compulsory,

integrating comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) into the national curriculum, and expanding CSE teacher-training initiatives.

Values and Pathways for Advancing Youth SRHR. Several values have consistently enabled progress. These align with a human rights-based approach, emphasising participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment, and legality.⁷

Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Participation (MIYP). Centering young people, particularly young feminists, in SRHR movements is critical for sustainability. The Spotlight article in this edition illustrate how youth leadership counters backlash, translates theory into practice, and builds locally owned demands for change. Flexible funding and community-defined priorities are essential to sustaining MIYP.

Accountability and legality.

Youth-led engagement with national, regional, and international mechanisms, such as Universal Periodic Reviews, demonstrates how global human rights standards can be leveraged to hold governments accountable for youth SRHR commitments while strengthening domestic legal and policy frameworks.

Non-discrimination and intersectionality. Intersecting identities, such as age, gender, class, geography, disability, and religion, shape access to CSE, SRHR services, and safety from violence. An intersectional, gender-justice lens grounded in lived realities is essential for inclusive outcomes.

Sustainable pathways: Future directions and action agenda. Thirty years after WPAY, ICPD, and Beijing, and a decade into the 2030 Agenda, significant gaps remain. Adolescents and young people continue to face structural barriers to realising their rights.

In South Asia, two out of five girls are projected to marry before the age of 18.⁸ Across Asia, an estimated 80 million girls are affected by female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C).⁹ These practices undermine bodily autonomy and sustainable development. One in eight unintended births globally occurs in Asia and the Pacific, while more than eight million adolescent pregnancies occur annually among girls aged 15–19, nearly half unintended.¹⁰ Young women and girls also face high levels of gender-based and sexual violence.

Digital Spaces Have Become Increasingly Hostile to SRHR and CSE Advocacy, Mirroring Offline Backlash.

Opposition to CSE is often rooted in religious and cultural beliefs, frequently stoked by anti-rights actors spreading misinformation to incite public fear. Globally, the rise of restrictive regimes has added layers of agitation to CSE advocacy. Despite a growing anti-rights movement, a culture of silencing, and increased surveillance, young people are taking charge and intensifying their demands for CSE.

Key Pathways Forward Include:

Implementing global, regional, and national youth partnership initiatives points to many learnings and pathways forward such as instituting systems approaches to youth-friendly SRHR policies and address social and structural barriers, strategise based on evidence-informed advocacy grounded in lived realities and rigorous data, foster innovation and agility, including digital and community-based solutions, strengthen capacities of young people emphasising intergenerational and peer learning, expanded civic space, including institutionalized platforms such as the APFSD Youth Forum, enable ethical digital transformation, addressing digital divides and safety, sustain funding for youth-led and youth-serving initiatives. Leverage digital initiatives across the region, such as gamified CSE curricula in

Indonesia to interactive SRHR platforms in Bangladesh and online CSE courses in Nepal, that demonstrate how young people are shaping new pathways for access and learning.^{11, 12} and finally build and strengthen movements, with young people as drivers, not beneficiaries, of change.^{11, 12}

Conclusion. The articles in this edition highlight powerful lessons in advancing young people's SRHR—anchored and tested pilot interventions in bodily autonomy, dignity, and justice. While gains are evident, the work remains unfinished. Sustaining momentum requires youth leadership, intergenerational collaboration, reimaged funding and accountability models, and collective

responsibility across governments, donors, and civil society. Young people have repeatedly demonstrated that they are not only stakeholders but experts and leaders—capable of shaping inclusive, rights-affirming futures in an increasingly constrained global landscape.

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spotlight

BOLD IN THE BACKLASH: Young Feminists Reshaping SRHR Movements

The global SRHR landscape is currently marked by fatigue and fading hope. This has not been the wish of many SRHR champions, civil society organisations (CSOs), feminists, or allies, but rather the result of systemic changes that have led to a shrinking civic space, the emergence of strong anti-rights movements, and, more recently, funding cuts in health, with SRHR being the most affected.^{1, 2}

Kenya mirrors global trends, where anti-rights actors now influence policy spaces, threatening SRHR gains, especially for adolescents and young people.^{1, 2} This includes policy makers funded by international anti-rights movements who develop anti-SRHR bills similar to Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill.^{1, 3}

Another blow to civil society is the increased surveillance of CSO activities when they are not aligned with prevailing conservative values or when they challenge the government, which may result in deliberate sidelining from civic space or, worse, deregistration of organisations.^{3, 4} In December 2024, 2,802 organisations in Kenya were de-registered by the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) Coordination Board, citing failure to observe set legal obligations.⁴

These pressures have cast a shadow over progress, but even in the thick of this storm, resistance thrives. History reminds us that wherever there is resistance, women, including young feminists, have always been on the frontlines.⁵

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Women have always been at the forefront of revolution; however, more often, they have been erased from history, and we rarely learn of their contributions to the positive change we now enjoy. During the fight for independence in Kenya, women fed fighters and carried out many other roles that went undocumented.⁶ Young women have similarly and consistently contributed to social change, advocating for justice, challenging traditional power structures, and pushing for gender equality, yet their efforts often go unnoticed and unacknowledged.^{5, 10} At the community level, young women play a vital role in community development, challenging social norms and patriarchal values that remain barriers to the fulfillment of their rights, particularly sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Young feminists are boldly claiming SRHR spaces from grassroots communities to national platforms. In Nairobi County's Kamkunji sub-county, young women recently co-led a press conference demanding access to SRHR in neglected urban areas. Despite limited resources, they showed up with clarity, courage, and collective power. Their powerful call out on being left behind in SRHR progress sparked policy conversations.

Despite these contributions, young women are often underrepresented in leadership positions at all levels; their efforts go undocumented, and their wins remain unrecognised. We must also acknowledge and address intergenerational tensions in movements, as well as the danger of treating young feminists as “token” voices rather than strategic co-leaders.⁷ It is important to create open and respectful spaces and not shy away from dialogue between generations, in order to understand differing perspectives and to carry forward the historical memory of the struggle to achieve quality SRHR. Building strategic partnerships between younger and older generations will leverage collective strengths and experience, fostering solidarity and sustainability within the movement.

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call out on being left behind in SRHR progress sparked policy conversations, particularly around the Youth-Friendly Services Guidelines (2016)⁸ and the implementation of the Facility Improvement and Financing ACT 2023.⁹ Their advocacy was not only heard but honoured with one young woman appointed as the youth representative at Eastleigh Health Centre, where she now provides oversight and guidance on youth health services. At a recent pan African conference on Adolescent and youth SRHR held in Mombasa Kenya, the SRHR Alliance Kenya hosted a youth-led, feminist panel on bodily autonomy in the face of SRHR backlash bringing together about 50 participants from CSOs, youth representatives, donors, government representatives, etc. The panel didn't shy away from talking about pleasure, religion, culture, and abortion politics.¹⁰

Centering young feminists in the SRHR movement is not only inclusive but critical to ensuring the sustainability of SRHR gains and translating theory into practice. Young women bring fresh language, digital savvy, creative campaigning approaches, lived experience, and an intersectional lens that expands movements and connects with the current generation. At the SRHR Alliance Kenya, this belief is not merely theoretical; it is practiced. Our approach to Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Participation is embedded in our governance and programming. Young women co-lead advocacy efforts, shape organisational strategies, and are supported to represent the Alliance in national and global spaces. We uphold feminist leadership by ensuring a respectful and safe work environment; currently, 90% of our staff are women, all under the age of 35. We actively promote Gender Transformative Approaches through internal reflection, inclusive policies, and co-created campaigns with youth groups across different counties in Kenya. To sustain

this work, we champion flexible funding models¹¹ that allow young feminists and youth-led, community-based institutions to build institutional capacity and meet compliance standards. Flexible funding also ensures that interventions are locally rooted and designed with young women, for young women, allowing bold and relevant ideas to thrive.

The SRHR space has faced difficult moments in the past. Funding cuts have long been a looming threat, and anti-rights movements have been active for more than three decades.¹² While the current moment may feel new and deeply disheartening, we have overcome similar challenges before. Young women have held the line in this struggle in every generation, and I believe we will overcome this too. It is time to tighten our laces, shout louder, fight more fiercely, and win boldly. For the sake of our present and our future, young feminists will not back down—and we need everyone's support in this season. Young feminists are not the future of SRHR movements. We are the force shaping them now.

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SRHR EDUCATION UNFILTERED: Empowering Young People for a Healthier and Safer Future

“When I had my first period, I was shocked. I thought I had some disease. I went to my mom, and due to shyness and stigma, she only said this might happen to some girls. Without really knowing what it is and why it occurs, I kept praying for months, asking God to cure me from this disease till I got to know the truth...” — A Bangladeshi girl attaining puberty in the early 2000s

In the last 25 years, the world has leapt forward. We have sent robots to Mars, built AI that thinks, and shrunk the world to a tap through the internet. Yet for many young people, their first period or wet dream still feels like a mistake. Time-resistant taboos and misinformation around puberty continue to fail adolescents.

Adolescence is a roller-coaster journey—a phase when young people need dignity, inclusion, and honest, age-appropriate knowledge about their bodies, minds, and rights. Yet in Bangladesh, deep-rooted taboos continue to silence conversations on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), puberty, and mental health. Although the national curriculum includes topics on pubertal changes, these lessons are often skipped in classrooms, or worse, pages are stapled shut to discourage students from reading them. As a result, confusion and misinformation thrive, pushing adolescents toward unreliable and sometimes harmful sources.

Myths such as avoiding sour food, milk, fish, meat, or bathing during menstruation remain widespread, negatively affecting girls' health.

Falling prey to quacks to “fix” nocturnal emissions, or experiencing anxiety, shame, and confusion around pubertal changes, is also common. Many adolescents turn to misleading websites, sometimes leading to unhealthy behaviours, including addiction to pornography and other harmful activities.

Adolescence is challenging for all, but it is especially difficult for adolescents with disabilities. Dipti (pseudonym), a girl with an intellectual disability, faced menstruation with fear and confusion. She could neither understand the changes in her body nor express her pain. Her mother, constrained by stigma and silence around menstruation, was also unsure how to support her.

With support from Rifat (pseudonym), a youth leader from the Right Here Right Now (RHRN) coalition, Dipti's mother learned about menstrual health, hygiene, nutrition, and available adolescent-friendly health services. Rifat also explained menstruation to Dipti using accessible language and educational cartoons. Today, Dipti manages her menstrual cycle with greater confidence, and her mother is overcoming long-held taboos, fostering a more supportive home environment.

Amin (pseudonym), an eighth-grade student, attended a boys' puberty session in 2023 facilitated by Wreetu under the RHRN2 programme in Bangladesh. He shared that when he first experienced nocturnal emission, he felt shocked, afraid, and ashamed. A trusted cousin, though well-meaning, told him it was “very bad,” linked it to evil eyes, and

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referred him to a local Kobiraj (informal healer). After taking ineffective medicine and experiencing deep shame, Amin attended the puberty session. Afterwards, he shared with the facilitator: “Now I understand the biological and scientific reasons behind wet dreams. I am no longer ashamed of this pubertal change.”

Research Findings: Wreetu Boys' Puberty Initiative.

Wreetu, a youth-led partner in the RHRN2 phase in Bangladesh, has been advocating for puberty and reproductive health education in schools since 2016. Responding to growing demand from boys, Wreetu conducted puberty education sessions for 1,500 adolescent boys across five districts—Jashore, Kishoreganj, Gaibandha, Satkhira, and Rangpur—in 2023. The sessions focused on puberty, reproductive health, hygiene, safety, and consent.

In 2025, Wreetu conducted a quasi-experimental study titled “Effect of Puberty Education Sessions on Adolescent Boys' Perceptions, Knowledge, and Practices of Puberty in Bangladesh.” Preliminary findings revealed that 81.3% of boys felt confident once they understood pubertal changes. In the intervention group, 52% recognised puberty as involving both physical and mental changes, and 57% understood that it is not an illness. What once felt confusing became a source of strength. Boys learned that their bodies are not taboo and that curiosity about bodily changes does not make them “bad”.

Road to Interventions and Impact.

Over the past decade, RHRN in Bangladesh has supported a strong pool of young changemakers advancing SRHR knowledge in their communities. With RHRN's support, young people serve as peer educators, community mobilisers, and volunteers; lead advocacy with local governments to ensure SRHR education in schools; enhance services in local health facilities; establish adolescent health corners; activate Union Health Standing Committees; and mobilise menstrual hygiene and first-aid supplies for schools and communities.

Young changemakers also bust myths and raise awareness online through digital content and campaigns, helping adolescents navigate puberty with accurate information and care. Key youth-led interventions include community sensitisation, peer education, and street theatre, designed by and for young people to create safer spaces for future generations. Online short videos, question-and-answer sessions with doctors, cartoon series, and myth-busting campaigns by influencers and medical professionals have further helped break taboos.

Adolescent groups have played a critical role in leading conversations both inside and outside classrooms. Hundreds of adolescent questions were collected and compiled into a booklet with accurate, scientific answers. This approach ensures that both in-school and out-of-school adolescents receive age-appropriate guidance and access to services.

Online Information and School-

Based Engagement. Despite progress, many students still struggle to access clear, engaging, and age-appropriate information on health and puberty. Teachers' and parents' reluctance to discuss these topics, alongside gaps in comprehensive SRHR education, remain significant barriers.

To address this, Wreetu developed youth-friendly materials, including a comic book on boys' puberty challenges and the7teen.com, a digital platform offering verified information alongside music, videos, and interactive content. With over 150 articles and creative resources, the platform has earned the trust of adolescents, youth, and parents, making accurate information more accessible.

Breaking taboos and encouraging open conversations—grounded in science—is essential. RHRN Bangladesh has conducted school sessions to equip adolescents with correct information and to support teachers in delivering SRHR topics. One class 7 student shared during a study, "I wish I had these awareness sessions when I was in class 5 or earlier," highlighting young people's eagerness for timely information.

Youth-Led Advocacy and Education System Strengthening.

RHRN works with young people aged 15–30 across Bangladesh to ensure youth remain at the centre of SRHR interventions. With RHRN's support, youth groups conducted surveys in 50 educational institutions, documented students' experiences, and presented findings to District Education Officers (DEOs). Through persistent advocacy, DEOs in seven districts issued official letters directing schools to improve SRHR education delivery.

Sustainable change requires integration into mainstream systems. RHRN Bangladesh developed a Whole School Approach (WSA) that embeds SRHR education throughout the school environment by engaging teachers, students, families, and school management. The model includes parent-teacher meetings, improved WASH facilities, functional sexual harassment redressal committees, strengthened teacher capacity, and healthier student-teacher relationships. It follows

government curriculum and guidelines and is currently being piloted in 66 schools in collaboration with the Ministry of Education.

Conclusion and Way Forward. The road to impact has not been easy. Progress came amid backlash against SRHR, widespread misinformation, social taboos, shrinking civic space, weak policy mandates, and the optional status of textbooks containing SRHR content. Yet experience shows that relationship-building, strategic framing, youth leadership, and alignment with education system priorities can transform small pilots into sustainable, government-owned programmes.

Key ways forward include strong government commitment to SRHR education, investment in youth-led initiatives, inclusive approaches that reach marginalised communities and persons with disabilities, community engagement through accurate information, strengthened digital spaces, and the institutionalisation of SRHR education within schools.

Hira, Amin, and Dipti show that change is possible when silence is broken and young people are empowered. Yet many adolescents still navigate puberty in fear and confusion. The next 25 years must not repeat the last. Normalising conversations on puberty and scaling up SRHR education is not just about health—it is about dignity, inclusion, and the right to grow up informed and unafraid.

Will we act boldly enough to make that future a reality?

HERUS AND RIMAS EVERYWHERE: Queer Youth, Intersectionality, and the Future of SRHR

Introduction. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) are essential for all, yet remain out of reach for some LGBTQI+ youth.

Globally, SRHR service uptake among sexual and gender minorities remains low, with discrimination, punitive laws, and the absence of inclusive services acting as key barriers.¹

Evidence from diverse regions highlights how widespread and persistent these barriers are. For example, a study in the United States found that 41.1% of LGBTQI+ youth aged 18–34 reported experiencing discrimination in healthcare settings, a reminder that even in contexts with relatively advanced healthcare systems, stigma continues to restrict access to essential rights.²

These barriers do not exist in isolation; they intersect with factors such as faith, caste, class, and geography, producing layers of marginalisation. Yet, within these intersections of exclusion, queer youth are forging new forms of resistance and transformative strategies, turning sites of failure into spaces of possibility.

Stories that set the stage: Heru and Rima.

"I didn't know what I was feeling at the time," Heru recalls, reflecting on a small group session at Queer Camp in 2020. He was 22—a queer man from a rural, conservative town, raised by an uncle with strict Islamic values after losing both parents as a toddler. The five-day camp, hosted by YIFoS Indonesia (Youth Interfaith Forum on Sexuality), was the first place he felt safe enough to speak freely.

"It was the first space where I felt safe enough to be honest. I remember taking a moment of silence before I started sharing my story. There's something wrong with me, and it hurts." Heru's questions were often met with silence. Even in healthcare settings, stigma ran deep.

"When I finally got the courage to take an HIV test, I asked a nurse about sexuality. She looked at me and said, 'Let's talk about how to get closer to God so our lives are healthier.' That stuck with me."³

Meanwhile, in Pokhara, Nepal, Rima, a 25-year-old Dalit trans woman, faced equally steep hurdles. Coming from a family that did not support her financially or emotionally, she had little access to gender-affirming healthcare.

Public clinics were unwelcoming, often misgendering her or refusing care. "Gender-affirming healthcare is non-existent in my area. There are no trans-friendly clinics, no specialised services, and the timing of public clinics is rigid and unwelcoming," Rima shared.

The situation worsened after a funding cut that severely impacted HIV/AIDS-related services. Fearing discrimination and misgendering, Rima found herself hesitating to visit clinics. "I don't feel safe. The spaces aren't made for people like me."⁴

Both stories reveal a harsh truth: LGBTQI+ youth are often excluded from systems that claim to protect them.

The Stage: Let's Zoom Out. Heru and Rima's experiences reflect broader realities faced by LGBTQI+ youth in Indonesia and Nepal. The data below

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not only confirms these patterns but also deepens the understanding of the challenges they faced.

In Indonesia, stigma in healthcare is widespread. According to the PLHIV 2.0 Stigma Index, 29.5% of people aged 18–24 made up 29.5% of those living with HIV who reported experiencing discrimination—the highest rate among all age groups.⁵

Structural barriers compound this, as many young transgender people cannot obtain national ID cards or change their legal gender, leaving them excluded from basic services like government aid.⁶ Over 170 local regulations restrict women and LGBTQI+ communities through curfews, limitations on expression, and control of assembly.⁷ Public opinion is equally hostile: only 9% of Indonesians believe homosexuality should be accepted, and 87.6% view LGBTQI+ people as a threat.⁸

Research by the Blue Diamond Society, in collaboration with Save the Children Nepal and Bhutan, found that in Nepal, 42.7% of LGBTQI+ youth experienced anxiety and/or depression, yet more than two-thirds never accessed formal mental health services due to stigma and confidentiality concerns.⁹ The study also mapped the prevalence of depression and anxiety in the two weeks from the date of assessment using the PHQ-2 and GAD-2 scales.¹⁰

Discrimination in healthcare is common, with 38.8% of LGBTQI+ individuals reporting mistreatment, including trans people being mocked when describing their health concerns.¹¹ Schools are

unsafe: only 20% of LGBTQI+ students described their schools as safe, while 72% reported experiencing violence.¹² After USAID withdrew support, clinics like Parichaya Samaj closed, cutting off thousands from HIV prevention and safe-sex counseling, forcing queer communities to rely on government-run clinics where stigma and risk remained high.¹³

The Turning Point: Finding Community and Purpose. Both Heru and Rima found strength and clarity through youth-led and community-driven spaces that treated them not just as beneficiaries but as leaders. Heru's transformation began at Queer Camp, organised by YIFoS Indonesia, where multi-faith leaders reimagined religion as a source of affirmation rather than rejection. "It was like breaking a chain in my head," he recalled.

For Rima, empowerment came through the Rainbow Youth Leadership Program at Blue Diamond Society, where she found belonging and the confidence to raise her voice: "BDS gave me a sense of belonging. I found my people."

Their paths illustrate how meaningful youth engagement requires more than participation; it requires ownership. Heru now leads a YIFoS programme that expands access to HIV services and distributes direct funding to local LGBTQI+ youth organisations, demonstrating that sharing resources is itself a form of power-sharing. Rima brings her intersectional experience into schools, campaigns, and lobby meetings, using her identity as an advocacy tool rather than a barrier. Both stories underscore that when youth are given space to lead, they not only transform their own lives but also reshape organisations and movements.

Youth, Intersectionality, and Collective Power. Heru and Rima's journeys remind us that queer youth leadership is not just about personal resilience but about reshaping the spaces around them. In

Indonesia, YIFoS built unlikely coalitions with faith-based universities and progressive clerics, challenging the Bogor Regulation (No. 10/2021) and framing SRHR as a justice issue within religion. In Nepal, BDS moved between classrooms and courtrooms, pushing for LGBTQI+ inclusion in school curricula while also advocating for marriage equality. These efforts show how young activists stretch their advocacy across different terrains, from community halls to legal systems.

What connects these efforts is that they are never working alone. Both YIFoS and BDS are part of broader movements where funding is fragile, anti-rights groups are growing, and civic space is shrinking. Still, youth leaders continue to redistribute resources, bring new voices forward, and insist on lasting change.

For LGBTQI+ youth like Heru and Rima, identity is never experienced in fragments. Faith, caste, class, gender and geography intersect with larger systems of oppression—patriarchy, heteronormativity, caste hierarchy and class inequality—to create unique vulnerabilities. These systems show up in daily life: rejection by families, discrimination in schools, and healthcare that punishes non-conformity. Intersectionality helps us see that these are not isolated struggles but structured exclusions.

Yet intersectionality is also a source of strength. By drawing on their multiple identities, Heru and Rima are not only resisting oppression but reshaping advocacy. Their leadership shows that building power requires working across sectors—linking health to education, faith to media, and grassroots realities to national policy. For funders, this means supporting initiatives that address overlapping barriers rather than siloed projects. For movements, it means embedding strategies that connect struggles against patriarchy, casteism, heteronormativity and classism with the

fight for SRHR. For policymakers, it means designing rights frameworks and services that prioritise those most marginalised.

The lesson is clear: when youth are trusted not just to participate but to lead, they transform organisations and movements. Intersectionality, treated not as an afterthought but as a foundation, becomes a source of collective power. In an era of shrinking civic space and rising anti-rights forces, youth-led, cross-sector, and cross-border solidarity is what makes transformation possible. If SRHR justice is to be realised, it must be intersectional at its core.

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SHIFTING GROUNDS: Mapping Young People-Led Advocacy Progress and Persistent Barriers in SRHR

Right Here Right Now (RHRN) is a strategic partnership of more than 60 organisations working globally to advance the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) of young people. In Asia, the RHRN programme has been implemented from 2021–2025 in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, where it stands as a testament to youth-led resilience and advocacy. Through diverse coalitions, cross-sectoral movements, and meaningful engagement with young champions and advocates, the programme has shifted public narratives, influenced policy, and reclaimed digital and physical spaces for SRHR dialogue.

Shifting Grounds: Leading from the Ground.

“I was once afraid to speak in front of my family—now I speak for my community.”

These powerful words from a young girl in Mymensingh capture how youth-led advocacy in Bangladesh has transformed lives. Similarly, in Langkat, Indonesia, young people attending their first advocacy meeting expressed how their sense of responsibility grew: “At first, I only came because my neighborhood chief asked me to. But now, I feel responsible for ensuring my peers get the protection they deserve.”

As the RHRN programme concludes, it leaves behind more than a legacy—it offers a roadmap of continued struggle, resilience, and adaptation. Across all three countries, young people are increasingly empowered to claim their

rights and to influence local and national policymakers. Their advocacy has centered on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), youth-friendly SRHR services, LGBTQIA+ rights, and SRHR for young people with disabilities.

In Nepal, young people made tangible progress in advancing CSE. Local governments allocated budgets for SRHR initiatives, and municipalities such as Godavari (Far West) incorporated CSE into local curricula. Review committees were formed within the Curriculum Development Committee (CDC) and the National Health Education Information and Communication Centre (NHEICC) to revise national school curricula.

“The Grade 7 Health, Physical, and Creative Arts textbook had a chapter mentioning the LGBTIQ community, but it offered incomplete and inaccurate definitions. During our consultation, insights from young queer representatives from RHRN partner Blue Diamond Society were instrumental in addressing these gaps. As a result, we’ve revised the content to provide accurate information, framed through a human rights lens.” — Curriculum Development Officer, Curriculum Development Committee Ministry of Education, Nepal

Youth in Indonesia followed a clear advocacy pathway—capacity building, drafting recommendations, and participating in hearings with local parliament—which contributed to the final approval of a reproductive health regulation in Jombang.

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In Kenanga village, a youth-led community centre creatively blended education and entertainment by organising a Village Culture Festival. Traditional performances such as Reog were used to attract teenagers before engaging them in SRHR activities.

“In villages, entertainment really matters. When there’s something like Reog or Depok, teenagers show up—and that’s when we invite them to join the educational activities.” — Ririn, member of Kenanga Community Services Center, Indramayu - Indonesia

The activity was conducted in collaboration with local stakeholders and community leaders. This collaborative approach has contributed to a decrease in child marriage and raised awareness about sexual violence in the village.

In Bangladesh, the programme moved beyond grassroots mobilisation to strengthen youth engagement with government institutions. Young people joined school and clinic committees, contributed to decision-making, and influenced local development agendas. Through structured feedback loops, youth were not only included—they were listened to.

Youth advocacy also expanded beyond the national level. Representatives from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Indonesia

brought grassroots realities to regional and international platforms, including the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD), the Asia Pacific Population Conference (APPC), and the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). Youth played active roles in developing national and regional Youth Calls to Action.

Young advocates infused creativity, empathy and innovation into their work. They used menstrual hygiene boxes, SRHR YouTube videos, comic books, quizzes, and community theatre to help break stigma and foster meaningful community engagement. In Rangpur, Bangladesh, a young boy used cartoon illustrations to teach menstrual hygiene to a girl with intellectual disabilities—an example of inclusive, youth-driven solutions. Many youths also continued their education and avoided early marriage after receiving ICT and skills training through RHRN.

Lessons and the Plan Ahead. Youth-led advocacy was not without challenges. Young people faced stigma, resistance, and at times tokenism. They responded with empathy and creativity: when schools resisted SRHR content, youth invited teachers to informal storytelling sessions rather than confronting them directly. Patriarchal institutions continued to push back against CSE and LGBTIQ rights, and funding cuts threatened the sustainability of youth-led initiatives.

Despite these challenges, significant shifts emerged. Girls began using hygiene products, confidently requesting menstrual pads from teachers, and resisting early marriage. Young people are seeking better health services. These changes reflect the impact of RHRN's training, support, and belief in youth potential.

The RHRN journey proved that young people are not the future, they are the present. Their voices, demands, and strategies have transformed policy spaces, education systems, and social norms. The programme created conditions for youth to thrive, lead, and imagine new possibilities. Yet their full power cannot be realised until structural barriers, conservatism, tokenism, and resource inequities are dismantled. The seeds planted through RHRN must now be nurtured with trust, resources, and political will.

RHRN showed that real change comes when we move beyond representation and invest in transformation. We amplified youth voices and created the conditions for youth to thrive, lead, and reimagine their world.

Some of Our Key Learnings:

- **Capacity-building must be continuous and go beyond one-time training.** When youth are mentored in policy literacy, intersectional advocacy, and movement building, they become powerful changemakers.
- **SRHR cannot exist in silos.** Linking SRHR with climate justice, disability rights, and digital rights strengthens advocacy and dismantles systemic barriers.
- **Decentralised advocacy is important.** Engaging local governments, not just national bodies, proved highly effective. In Nepal's Kailali district, youth dialogues with school management committees helped reintroduce CSE into local curricula.

- **Collaborative, intergenerational partnerships matter.** In Indonesia, cooperation among youth, adults, and diverse stakeholders strengthened community-level change and influenced local regulations.
- **Systemic change must happen across all sectors, including media.** Journalists and media institutions play an important role in shifting public narratives on SRHR.
- **Strategic engagement with influential institutions:** Partnering with ministries such as Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs is an effective strategy to foster change in contexts where religious and patriarchal values dominate.

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The RHRN journey proved that young people are not the future, they are the present. Their voices, demands, and strategies have transformed policy spaces, education systems, and social norms. The programme created conditions for youth to thrive, lead, and imagine new possibilities.

Yet their full power cannot be realised until structural barriers, conservatism, tokenism, and resource inequities are dismantled. The seeds planted through RHRN must now be nurtured with trust, resources, and political will.

For a truly inclusive SRHR future, youth-led movements must be centered.

We are not done. We are evolving, and we are ready for what comes next.

THE ASIA-PACIFIC FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (APFSD) YOUTH FORUM:

A Resilient Regional Youth Movement for the SDGs

Introduction. The annual Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) Youth Forum has emerged as a dedicated civic space for young people in all their diversity to engage on sustainable development issues in the Asia-Pacific region since 2017.¹ Initiated by the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) and co-convened with regional youth organisations—Youth LEAD and YPEER Asia-Pacific Center—the group of co-conveners and collaborators has expanded over the years.

Since 2022, the Forum has been joined by regional youth networks such as the Major Group for Children and Youth (MGCY), the MGCY Asia-Pacific Caucus, and the Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP. In 2025, Youth Empowerment in Climate Action Platform (YECAP) also joined the collaboration. Additional partners include the Right Here Right Now (RHRN) Global Youth Partnership, the Asia-Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism (APRCM), and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

The APFSD Youth Forum (APFSD YF) is convened ahead of the intergovernmental APFSD, which serves as the preeminent regional platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Asia and the Pacific.² These partnerships have grown steadily over time, reflecting the success of the APFSD YF and the strengthening of meaningful youth

engagement in regional sustainable development processes.

The APFSD YF is not merely an annual event. It stands as a dedicated, inclusive, regional youth convening platform that advocates for the realisation of young people's human rights, gender equality, and the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Over time, it has evolved into a thriving regional SDG youth movement in Asia and the Pacific, mobilising more than 11,000 adolescents and youth aged 13 to 30 since 2017.

A Story of Chronology, Progress, Setbacks, Resilience, and Solidarity.

Initiated in 2017 with the vision of creating a dedicated civic space where young people are at the forefront—connected, organised, and resilient in shaping their own sustainable development—the APFSD YF began with 60 youth scholars representing youth-led, youth-serving, and youth-allied organisations across diverse social movements in Asia and the Pacific.

Participants were selected through a rigorous and inclusive process prioritising those most marginalised. After days of discussion and deliberation, young people developed a comprehensive Youth Call to Action on the theme Sustainable Solutions to Eradicate Poverty and Promote Prosperity, which informed the intergovernmental APFSD.³ This

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Call to Action highlighted critical gaps that could only be addressed through meaningful youth engagement in SDG implementation.

In 2018, 65 youth advocates continued the momentum under the theme Young People's Vision for a Sustainable, Inclusive, and Resilient Asia-Pacific. Participants reviewed SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 15, and 17 through a youth lens and developed a Youth Call to Action to inform the Fifth APFSD. For the first time, the APFSD YF was formally recognised in the official APFSD report, and since then the APFSD YF collaborates with ESCAP to organise the youth forum ahead of the APFSD.

In 2019, the Forum expanded to include 80 youth representatives. While acknowledging progress made by countries toward achieving the SDGs, young people highlighted persistent gaps in meaningful youth participation in policy formulation and implementation. SDGs 4, 8, 10, 13, 16, and 17 were reviewed, and a Youth Call to Action urged governments to address structural exclusions affecting young people across the region.

In 2020, the APFSD YF paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, co-conveners reimagined youth engagement modalities. Although a formal YF did not take place, young people participated in ESCAP-led virtual consultations, contributed to the Chair's Summary, and engaged in a regional youth survey ahead of the Seventh APFSD to capture youth perspectives during a period of compounded crises.

In 2021, the Forum underwent a transformative shift by adopting a fully virtual modality, significantly expanding its reach and inclusivity. The 2021 APFSD YF brought together 500 participants from 34 countries, selected from over 2,000 applications. Participants reviewed SDGs 1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 12, 13, 16 and 17 through youth lenses and engaged in capacity-building on data-driven advocacy.

A major outcome of 2021 was the expansion from a single Regional Youth Call to Action to four sub-regional and eight national Youth Calls to Action. ESCAP subsequently included the 2021 Regional Youth Call to Action as a reference document for Member States on the official APFSD webpage.

Building on this success, the virtual modality continued in 2022. The APFSD YF and the Asia-Pacific Regional ECOSOC Youth Forum were jointly convened under the theme Youth-Focused Discussions on Building Back Better from COVID-19. A total of 630 young people from 34 countries participated, developing one Regional Youth Call to Action alongside eight national and five sub-regional Calls to Action. The CSE4ALL campaign was launched during this period, positioning young people at the forefront of advocacy for comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). During the APFSD 2022, Jivitesh Gupta representing "Very Young Adolescents", delivered the opening plenary speech

on behalf of youth constituency and addressed the governments in the region.

In 2023, with improved global health conditions, the Forum transitioned to a hybrid modality, combining in-person and virtual participation. Four hundred young people from 36 countries engaged under the theme Accelerating Recovery from COVID-19 and Implementing the 2030 Agenda with Young People at the Forefront. Youth advocates delivered statements across intergovernmental and civil society spaces, and 16 additional country and sub-regional Calls to Action were developed.

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Prim Rajasurang Wongkrasaeamongkol, an adolescent from Thailand delivered the Youth Forum Call to Action at the opening of the intergovernmental APFSD. Telesia Kobiti, another young person from Pacific Disability Forum delivered a powerful and inspiring CSO statement highlighting demand for development justice and sustainable development; Jin Tanaka delivered a statement on behalf of the APRCEM Youth Constituency to highlight youth participation in development justice; and Ashley Yong delivered a statement at the sub-regional panel, highlighting young people's needs and inclusion in South East Asia.

In 2024, the APFSD YF convened 450 young people from 36 countries under the theme Reinforcing the 2030 Agenda and Eradicating Poverty in Times of Multiple Crises: The Effective Delivery of Sustainable, Resilient and Innovative Solutions in Asia and the Pacific with Young People at the Forefront. Participants produced one Regional Youth Call to Action, 19 national Calls to Action, and two sub-regional Calls to Action, with a focus on SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 13, 16, and 17. A youth-led innovation exhibition was also introduced.

In 2025, the Forum reached its largest scale to date. A total of 549 young people from 34 countries participated under the theme Advancing Sustainable, Inclusive, Science- and Evidence-Based Solutions for Leaving No Young Person Behind in Asia and the Pacific. Participants developed one Regional, one sub-regional, and 23 national Calls to Action, alongside 37 SDG abstracts and 18 showcased innovations from 10 countries. The recommendations focused on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, SDG 5, SDG 8, SDG 14, and SDG 17. Thirty-five youth scholars also actively engaged in the intergovernmental APFSD, reinforcing youth leadership in regional SDG processes.

The innovations covered a range of topics from CSE to the utilisation of alternative fuel sources, digitalisation of Gender Equality information, and community-led practices, among others. At the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) Youth Forum 2024 and 2025, SDG innovations was initiated at the forum and youth scholars showcased their work, inspiring young people from the region to develop sustainable transformative and innovative solutions for change.

Where We Are Now. Since 2017, eight APFSD YF have been organised ahead of the UNESCAP-convened intergovernmental APFSD. More than 11,000 youth advocates from across the Asia-Pacific region have been mobilised, and an alumni network is being established to sustain long-term engagement.

The APFSD Youth Forum has institutionalised a dedicated civic space for young people to contribute to SDG follow-up and review processes at national and regional levels. Gender equality, human rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), diversity, and inclusion have remained cross-cutting advocacy themes, contributing to progressive, rights-based value formation among young people.

Participants from marginalised and conflict-affected contexts, including young people with disabilities, Indigenous youth,

very young adolescents, LGBTQI+ youth, and those from rural or crisis-affected settings, have been prioritised throughout the Forum's history.

This has contributed to the progressive rights based value clarification among young people. The engagement of all UN agencies and regional resource organisations at the APFSD Youth Forum, further strengthened capacities of young people on sustainable development from a technical lens over the years.

To date, eight Regional Youth Calls to Action, 17 sub-regional Calls to Action, and 70 national Youth Calls to Action have been developed and presented to governments during APFSD side events. Five self-sustained national APFSD Youth Alliances currently exist in Nepal, Bangladesh, Mongolia, Bhutan, and Papua New Guinea.

As of 2025, the APFSD Youth Forum continues as a resilient regional SDG youth movement. Its sustainability depends on intentional political commitment and adequate resourcing to ensure young people are at the forefront of their own sustainable development. Investing in such civic spaces is essential to achieving the SDGs and upholding young people's right to development.

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RETHINKING DONOR-DRIVEN METRICS AND FUNDING FOR YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN SOUTH ASIA

Youth engagement in social justice in South Asia has had a long and rich trajectory, spanning several decades and taking various forms. The existing landscape of initiatives and interventions approach and define youth leadership in diverse ways. Young people are increasingly pushing for transformative change and a redistribution of power. While young feminist leadership is considered as a key driver and accelerator to achieve gender justice, they continue to face significant barriers in accessing resources and support including, unequal power dynamics in decision making processes, disregard

for their opinions, lack of resources and support, lack of inclusive and intersectional approaches, burnout and mental health issues that affect their meaningful participation. Amongst these, one of the most pressing issues is the current funding landscape, which is often donor-driven, unsustainable and disconnected from the realities on the ground.

This article, based on insights from a 2023 research study, 'Researching Youth Leadership Towards Gender Justice in India, Bangladesh and Nepal: Building a Learning Agenda', conducted by Asian-

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While young feminist leadership is considered as a key driver and accelerator to achieve gender justice, they continue to face significant barriers in accessing resources and support.

Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), explores the critical need to rethink these donor-driven metrics and funding paradigms. It argues that shifting to a model that is more flexible, democratic, and grounded in the expertise of young leaders is essential for fostering a truly transformative youth leadership ecosystem in the pursuit of gender justice.

This calls for not mere administrative adjustments, but a fundamental reimagining of the donor-youth relationship that moves beyond the current transactional, compliance-driven model to embrace a paradigm of trust, shared power, and true partnership. By identifying the specific failures of the current system, particularly its exclusionary impact on youth from marginalised communities, this paper aims to catalyse action among funders to adopt new strategies for support, ensuring that the agency and community-based knowledge of youth leaders can be effectively resourced to drive lasting social change.

The Challenge of Donor-driven

Agendas. Youth leaders felt that the most significant challenge they faced was that funding agendas for young people were largely donor-driven and were frequently far removed from community narratives and ground realities of the needs of young people. Access to decision making tables at funding organisations also remain limited and is often occupied by a very small pool of youth leaders.

Similarly, it was also felt that donors were reluctant to fund youth-led, cross-sectoral and intersectional work on gender justice. This reluctance stems from the difficulty in siloing such work and confining it to specific themes and funding verticals, an approach that fails to recognise the complex and interconnected nature of gender justice issues, particularly as understood and addressed by young people.

Bureaucratic and Exclusionary Funding Processes.

Another significant barrier is the bureaucratic nature of funding processes. From pre-application to receiving funds and beyond, these processes are often tedious and exclusionary. The funding criteria (such as medium of

instruction/application) are often seen as favouring the privileged, creating additional hurdles for marginalised youth leaders. The dominance of English, lack of professional and technical skills around writing proposals and fundraising, difficulties in navigating and lack of awareness of the bureaucratic requirements (such as certifications/laws/policies etc) for funding were some of the key problems. These problems were often amplified and multi-layered for young leaders from remote geographies and other marginalised communities.

It was also felt that donors were reluctant to fund youth-led, cross-sectoral and intersectional work on gender justice. This reluctance stems from the difficulty in siloing such work and confining it to specific themes and funding verticals, an approach that fails to recognise the complex and interconnected nature of gender justice issues, particularly as understood and addressed by young people.

The fiscal, regulatory, and legal mechanisms required for an organisation to access local or international funds are cumbersome and fraught with political implications. For instance, the need for an 80G certificate or FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act) in India or the Social Welfare Council (SWC) registration in Nepal, poses significant challenges, especially for young or nascent organisations. In recent times, more political work and advocacy campaigns have come under government scrutiny, making it increasingly difficult for young leaders and organisations to register or renew their certifications.

Unsustainable Funding Models. South Asia has seen the rise of several youth networks and organisations in the gender justice space. However, due to extensive seed-funding and short-term outcome-driven funding models, these groups often struggle to sustain themselves over long periods. This short-term focus fails to recognise the long-term nature of social change and the need for sustained support to achieve meaningful impact. The sub-contracting model, where regional or national networks receive money and then sub-contract to grassroots or sub-national networks as implementing partners, can perpetuate power imbalances and limit the agency of local organisations if not implemented with transparency.

Rethinking Metrics and Funding

Approaches. Young leaders are asking for funding systems to be made more flexible, transparent and more accessible. While acknowledging the difficulty to get funds for cross-sectoral work that may not fit into existing donor verticals or strategic plans, it was felt that it was important for funding organisations to rethink their approach and move away from project-based funding towards core and unrestricted funding. Special attention is needed to resource both leadership development programmes amongst marginalised communities as well as to empower and encourage young leaders emerging from these communities.

Donors need to create spaces and structures that foster the environment of co-ownership and co-leadership of programmes with other actors and stakeholders, including policy makers, communities, international organisations, and young people in all their diversities. This includes ensuring that women, non-binary individuals, and other marginalised genders and communities have equal opportunities to directly influence, shape and impact, agendas,

processes and policy on issues that matter to them without elements of tokenism and gate-keeping by certain leaders or organisations. An important aspect towards this step is to invest in creating spaces where peer-learning, mentorship/intergenerational dialogues, shared perspectives and innovative and relevant capacity building efforts can be held based on the needs and interests of young leaders themselves. Given the widespread use of digital media as an important tool for advocacy and agency among youth leaders, there is a need for increased investment in capacity-building efforts around technology. This should include provision of equipment and access, centered around marginalised groups that are otherwise absent from digital spaces.

Young people are also demanding a larger push for intersectionality to reclaim spaces for a number of people from further marginalised groups such as those living at the intersection of caste, class, disability, and gender; young people from conflict zones, trans people, the intersex community and young people in remote-rural areas.

A strategic shift is needed to move away from what has been the focus thus far on youth leadership development programmes to more inclusive means of funding leadership programmes, co-created and co-owned by young people with strong advocacy components and long-term funding where donors create trust-based relationships and co-create agendas in meaningful participatory ways.

Donors need to move away from short-term, quantitative metrics towards more nuanced, qualitative measures of impact that recognise the long-term nature of social change. This shift should include metrics that value process as much as outcomes and recognise the importance of building movements and shifting social norms.

Core and flexible funding were repeatedly emphasised, particularly for youth engaged in advocacy and policy work, to build trust-based relationships with grantees to enable them to use the funds in a manner that they deemed right, especially on policy advocacy. Domestic donors were identified as having greater ability to provide unrestricted support because they are not bound by regulatory restrictions and legal issues that international funding agencies have to abide by.

Youth leaders also highlighted backlash and microaggressions—from family, community, organisations, or the state—as major barriers to participation. Donors must invest in mechanisms that can minimise the risk of violence, exploitation, burnout, or any other negative consequences of youth participation and leadership.

In response to the challenges of traditional funding models, many young leaders and youth-led organisations are diversifying their funding base through alternative models. Donors should consider supporting these innovative approaches, which include crowdfunding, revenue generation through social enterprise, and volunteer models.

Conclusion. The landscape of youth leadership and engagement towards gender justice in South Asia reflect a unique set of opportunities and challenges. Rethinking donor-driven metrics and funding is crucial to fostering transformative youth leadership in the gender justice space.

This shift requires a fundamental change in how donors approach their work, moving from a top-down, prescriptive model to one that is collaborative, flexible, and responsive to the needs and realities of young leaders on the ground.

This includes:

1. Directly funding youth leaders and their interventions/ initiatives;
2. Investing in strengthening the ecosystem for youth leadership so that youth leaders can thrive, and;
3. Resourcing transformative work that is co-owned and shared with young people through innovative funding models.

While these recommendations are not new, the continued gaps and barriers documented in the 2023 study continue to exist.

As youth engagement in gender justice continues to evolve, so too must the funding strategies that support this vital work. By rethinking donor-driven metrics and funding, we can create an enabling environment where youth leadership can truly thrive and make lasting impacts in the pursuit of gender justice.

Core and flexible funding were repeatedly emphasised, particularly for youth engaged in advocacy and policy work, to build trust-based relationships with grantees to enable them to use the funds in a manner that they deemed right, especially on policy advocacy. Domestic donors were identified as having greater ability to provide unrestricted support because they are not bound by regulatory restrictions and legal issues that international funding agencies have to abide by.

HOLDING DECISION-MAKERS ACCOUNTABLE TO SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS (SRHR) THROUGH THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW (UPR): *Lessons from Kenya*

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outcome documents have been leveraged to strengthen domestic policy and legal environments.

According to the UPR Info Uwazi Database, nearly three-quarters of recommendations issued through the UPR process are accepted for implementation.¹⁰ The Kenya Coalition on the UPR reported that 58% of recommendations issued to Kenya during the second cycle were implemented.¹¹ However, the Coalition—comprising more than 200 civil society organisations—was unable to ascertain the full level of implementation for the third cycle due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In May 2025, Kenya underwent its Fourth Cycle UPR Review.¹² As part of this process, Right Here Right Now 2 submitted a shadow report highlighting four key concerns:

1. Inadequate meaningful participation of young people and civil society in policy-making;
2. Limited access to comprehensive sexuality education for young people;
3. Inadequate access to comprehensive, youth-friendly SRHR services; and
4. High maternal mortality and morbidity resulting from unsafe abortion.¹³

The UPR Pre-Sessions held in Geneva in February 2025 created opportunities for civil society to engage directly with member states. Denmark recommended ensuring access to SRHR services, including family planning and maternal health services, while Iceland urged Kenya to protect and promote SRHR and integrate comprehensive sexuality education both in and out of school settings.¹⁴

In December 2023, the United Nations commemorated 75 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the foundational instrument adopted in 1948, which affirmed that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights.¹ The UDHR set out fundamental human rights—including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)—that states must protect, fulfil, and respect.² Binding treaties that followed, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), placed legal obligations on governments to uphold SRHR for all, including adolescents and youth.³ Ensuring that these commitments are upheld requires robust accountability mechanisms, in which young people play a critical role.

Despite progress inspired by global frameworks such as the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adolescents and young people in Kenya continue to face significant barriers to accessing youth-friendly SRHR services.⁴ These include structural barriers such as laws requiring parental or partner consent; socio-cultural barriers such as stigma surrounding youth sexuality; and individual barriers, including limited or

inaccurate knowledge of SRHR.⁵ The need for effective accountability mechanisms therefore remains crucial.

One of the key mechanisms for monitoring states' human rights obligations is the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the United Nations Human Rights Council.⁶ The UPR provides a platform for states to be reviewed on their entire human rights record every four and a half years, making it a critical avenue for advancing SRHR accountability at the national level.⁷ Kenya's experience demonstrates how the UPR can influence domestic policy, generate political commitment, and strengthen the enabling environment for SRHR.

Articles 2(5) and 2(6) of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) have provided a strong legal foundation for SRHR advocacy and accountability. These provisions establish that general rules of international law and ratified treaties form part of Kenyan law.⁸ The Right Here Right Now (RHRN) Programme implemented by the Network for Adolescent and Youth in Africa (NAYA) and partners in Kenya, and by ARROW and others globally has supported young people to engage in accountability mechanisms including treaty body reviews, the Human Rights Council, the Commission on Population and Development, and the Commission on the Status of Women.⁹ Through these engagements, progressive international

Following the review, Kenya accepted several key SRHR-related recommendations, including commitments to improve access to SRHR services, strengthen the HIV response, and address inequalities that disproportionately affect young people, persons with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people living with HIV. The state noted recommendations related to reforming punitive laws, increasing investment in SRHR services, decriminalising abortion, integrating comprehensive sexuality education across settings, and adopting inclusive health policies for sexual and gender minorities.¹⁵

However, the UPR process extends beyond recommendations; it is fundamentally about follow-up and accountability at the national level.

A notable feature of Kenya's engagement with the UPR was the development of its 2021–2025 UPR Implementation Plan following the third cycle review. The Plan grouped recommendations thematically, outlined specific actions, identified responsible actors, and included monitoring indicators and timelines.¹⁶ Developed through collaboration between state and non-state actors, the Plan serves as a concrete accountability framework, translating international commitments into trackable national actions.

Through this framework, RHRN 2 worked with partners, including the Kenya UPR Coalition, to follow up on key recommendations such as Portugal's call to review legal, policy, and structural barriers impeding SRHR access for adolescent girls, young women, and key populations vulnerable to HIV.¹⁷ In response, Kenya's National Committee on Criminal Justice Reforms undertook a comprehensive review of the criminal justice system to align it with the Constitution of Kenya (2010).

Developed through collaboration between state and non-state actors, the Plan serves as a concrete accountability framework, translating international commitments into trackable national actions.

In 2022, the Committee validated a reform roadmap, including draft amendments to the Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code, which were released in 2023.¹⁸ Key gains included the decriminalisation of petty offences and the review of provisions affecting sex workers, vulnerable groups, and gender-based discrimination. Despite persistent challenges related to funding, there has been significant progress on the recommendation, demonstrating the added value of the UPR Process.

Kenya's experience demonstrates that accountability is an ongoing process of translating commitments into lived realities for young people. International solidarity has been instrumental in sustaining this work through coordinated advocacy, shared learning, and collective pressure. Platforms such as RHRN 2 have amplified national struggles in global spaces, kept contested SRHR issues on international agendas, and generated political momentum for reform.

The UPR process has reinforced the understanding that accountability requires strengthening young people's capacity to advocate for progressive norms, resist regression, and hold governments accountable at the national level.

Moving forward, the challenge lies in ensuring that accepted recommendations are fully implemented through sustained monitoring, shadow reporting, and meaningful youth and civil society participation. At the same time,

spotlight

recognising and celebrating incremental gains remains essential for sustaining momentum. Only by turning commitments into action can the UPR deliver the transformative, rights-affirming change that young people are demanding, and deserve.

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CONNECTING THE DOTS FOR YOUTH SRHR: *The Value of RHRN Global Partnership*

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Over the past decade, the Right Here Right Now (RHRN) partnership was a beacon of hope for civil society organisations advancing young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The last five years, the RHRN programme has worked with 70 partner organisations across 10 countries—Bangladesh, Benin, Burundi, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Morocco, Nepal, Tunisia, and Uganda—alongside Rutgers, ARROW, CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, RNW Media, and IPPF Africa Region.

The partnership united diverse civil society groups, including youth-led organisations, into coalitions at local, regional, and global levels, all striving toward one shared goal: ensuring that young people in all their diversity can fully exercise their sexual and reproductive rights.

We believed this change could only happen if we ensured the meaningful participation of young people as a core strategy to strengthen a resilient and strong civil society movement and advance policy advocacy, building public support, and CSE delivery.

From the beginning, RHRN partners set clear ambition, drive, and commitment, embedding core values into every level of programming, governance, and strategy. Over the past decade, we learned by daring and doing—leading with trust, reflecting on the how, and letting principles guide decisions. Ten years on, this approach has sparked social transformations beyond what we first

envisioned, led by partners across country, regional, and global levels.

The programme concluded in 2025, and the independent end-term evaluation is nearly complete. This article highlights some key findings and reflections on how we strengthened youth leadership and advanced a sustainable SRHR agenda.

Empowered Young People Make Decisions About Their Sexuality, Voice Their Needs and Claim Their Rights.

The programme reached 53 million young people and their communities, opening doors to SRHR information and education that built knowledge, confidence, and decision-making. But our ambition went further: we believed that by equipping young people with information, we could nurture their leadership, enabling them to educate their peers, influence their surroundings, and drive advocacy within safe, supportive spaces.

Over the past ten years, this vision unfolded into vibrant youth agency—creativity spilling into clubs, community dialogues, media, and digital platforms, sparking changes at home, in schools, and across communities, and spiralled further by each country coalition and local and regional youth movements.

In many places, these shifts grew roots: youth-led organisations emerged, young leaders claimed seats in decision-making bodies, teachers became allies, governments set new guidance in motion and engaged actively through multi-stakeholder dialogues, and budgets were secured to sustain youth SRHR work.

Evidence from countries like Bangladesh and Kenya shows how combining interventions like CSE, peer education, leadership camps, digital campaigns with youth-driven structures created lasting capacity for advocacy and influence.

The evaluation revealed several pathways behind this transformation. Youth efforts gained legitimacy when teachers, parents, community leaders, and faith actors supported them, reducing resistance to sensitive SRHR topics and opening doors that otherwise would remain closed. Learning unfolded in a ripple effect: young people first absorbed skills, applied them, and then taught peers—each step reinforcing confidence and motivation. What began as short-term activities evolved into systems when youth groups and spaces were formally recognised and resources allocated to sustain the work.

What started as knowledge-sharing became a movement, ensuring that youth leadership could thrive well beyond the programme itself.

Strengthening Civil Society

Through Youth Movements. We lived our principle of meaningful youth participation by embedding it throughout the programme. Youth-led organisations were included in coalitions, and local solutions shaped how young voices were integrated into governance and decision-making. This gave rise to youth coordinators, advisory boards, councils, and newly registered youth-led organisations.

Yet we also recognised challenges: uneven integration across countries, risks of tokenism, and barriers rooted in power dynamics, social norms, and restrictive environments. Each year, the global partnership reaffirmed youth participation as a priority, encouraging safe spaces for reflection and dialogue to confront these challenges. This demonstrated that building a resilient civil society is not only about structures, but about continually reshaping power relations to ensure young people are not just present, but influential in shaping the future.

Youth Voices in Global Policy

Advocacy. A key strategy was to support the meaningful engagement of civil society organisations and youth to influence high-level decision-making processes and advance global norms and standards. Our collective work influenced international outcomes, strengthened accountability for human rights, equality, and non-discrimination, and also ensured that youth-led advocacy initiatives were prioritised.

We engaged with intergovernmental processes and treaty bodies such as the Human Rights Council (HRC), the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and the Commission on Population and Development (CPD) to defend and reinforce references to CSE for young people in their resolutions. Advocacy in these high-level processes helped secure commitments from member states at the national level. RHRN elevated young people's voices in national, regional, and global spaces, defending sexual and reproductive rights. Youth involvement in formal review processes was intentionally prioritised, emphasising their perspectives and needs within the SRHR discourse and provided opportunities for more intergenerational dialogues and mentorship of young activists.

Building an Enabling Ecosystem for Youth as Agents of Change.

The programme has demonstrated that informed and empowered youth can drive social change. It equipped young people with the knowledge and confidence to express their needs, claim their rights, and shape their environments. The evaluation showed that this empowerment yielded tangible outcomes—from improved menstrual health practices and more open dialogue about SRHR within families and schools, to stronger influence in the policy arena. Youth moved from learning in supportive spaces to leading peer education, community advocacy, and high-level policy engagement. This underscored the importance of creating environments where young people can learn, grow, and take action. Meaningful youth participation became the heartbeat of the programme, reflected in advisory groups, youth councils, and intergenerational mentorship.

Coalition-building amplified youth voices, mentorship ensured continuity, and intersectional solidarity made advocacy inclusive and effective. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, the programme created fertile ground for young people's rights to be championed and sustained.

At our closing celebration last November, the former national coordinator of Honduras reflected on how youth leadership had transformed the country. Many of the young participants are now leading organisations and networks, engaging in public conversations about rights and justice. Their continued presence and influence embody the resilience of the movement, reminding us that sustainability is not only about resources, but about the strength of relationships, the continuity of leadership, and the enduring spirit of youth agency.

Celebrating Achievements and Looking Forward.

As we reflect on RHRN's achievements, it is essential to celebrate the ways in which young people are reimagining inclusive and rights-based futures. The programme has shown that when young people are empowered and supported, they can drive significant change in their communities and beyond.

However, maintaining and expanding these gains requires ongoing advocacy, resources, and vigilance. Commitment to human-rights-based SRHR policies, laws, and budgets must be sustained, especially amid evolving political dynamics and rising opposition. Continued efforts are needed to create and fund inclusive and equitable partnerships, foster trust, and avoid power imbalances.

RHRN has demonstrated that cross-regional partnerships can be a powerful force for advancing young people's SRHR and gender justice. By connecting evidence-based advocacy, youth empowerment, innovative strategies, and a supportive enabling ecosystem, RHRN has created a model for driving change that can be replicated and expanded in the future.

The value of RHRN global partnerships lies in the ability to link various elements of advocacy and capacity strengthening, connect global and local levels, and foster strong alliances with youth at the centre. These connections have created a powerful force capable of transforming young people's lives worldwide.

Moving forward, it is essential to build on this foundation and continue striving for a future in which all young people can enjoy their SRHR and live in a world that respects and upholds their rights. With reducing funding, it is the connections made with the new generations that will continue to build hope for the future.

FROM EXCLUSION TO EMPOWERMENT: *Advancing SRHR for Young Persons with Disabilities in Nepal*

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Introduction. Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are fundamental human rights essential for dignity, autonomy, and overall well-being.¹ However, these rights are often among the least realised for young people with disabilities. Globally and in Nepal, their access to information, services, and decision-making is severely restricted by structural and systemic barriers, as well as by deep-seated social stigmas and cultural taboos. Persons with disabilities are frequently perceived as passive, dependent, or even asexual, assumptions that strip them of their agency and perpetuate their exclusion from vital SRHR discourse and programming.²

This article, by examining the work of the Blind Youth Association Nepal (BYAN), particularly through its involvement in the Right Here Right Now (RHRN) initiative, seeks to demonstrate how rights-based, inclusive programming can effectively transform this exclusion into empowerment. It offers a critical reflection on what genuinely inclusive SRHR looks like in practice, how tokenistic engagement can be avoided, and what crucial lessons can be applied to designing more responsive programmes.

Context and Rationale. Although all individuals are born free and equal, persons with disabilities consistently face systemic barriers that limit their rights and opportunities. Disability is too often misconstrued as an individual or medical problem, when in reality, it results from the interaction between an individual's impairment and a range of social,

environmental, and attitudinal barriers.³ Globally, approximately 1.3 billion people live with disabilities, and a significant 80% of them reside in low- and middle-income countries like Nepal.³ While international estimates suggest that 10–15% of Nepal's population may have disabilities, the 2021 national census reports a starkly low figure of only 2.2%.⁴ This extreme underreporting highlights the invisibility of persons with disabilities in national policy, planning, and resource allocation.

Within this broader context of structural exclusion, access to SRHR emerges as a particularly critical yet neglected concern for young people with disabilities. Although SRHR is firmly enshrined in international human rights instruments and reflected in Nepal's national legal and policy frameworks, these rights remain largely out of reach for many young persons with disabilities in practice. Barriers extend well beyond service availability and include pervasive stigma, cultural taboos, and deeply rooted misconceptions that deny or delegitimise their sexuality. These challenges are further intensified by intersecting factors such as gender, socio-economic status, and geographic location, which compound marginalisation and deepen inequities in access to information, services, and decision-making power.²

Disability and SRHR: The Gaps. In Nepal, sexuality is a highly sensitive topic, especially concerning persons with disabilities. They are often inaccurately viewed as asexual, dependent, or

incapable of making informed decisions about their own bodies.⁵ Such assumptions fuel paternalism, limiting their bodily autonomy and access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). Consequently, mainstream SRHR programmes frequently fail to address the diverse and specific needs of persons with disabilities.²

Evidence from various studies confirms the depth of these gaps. A 2016 study by Marie Stopes International revealed that 96.5% of young people with disabilities were unaware of modern family planning methods. While 94% had heard of safe abortion, nearly 40% were unaware that it was legal in Nepal.⁶ Inaccessible or discriminatory services further reinforce this exclusion, with women and girls with disabilities being 4–10 times more vulnerable to gender-based violence than their peers without disabilities. A more recent 2023 baseline study by BYAN in Kathmandu, Bara, and Surkhet found that while 78% of people with disabilities and 69% of parents had some SRHR awareness, most relied on social media as their primary source, leaving them vulnerable to misinformation.⁷ Similarly, only 21% of persons with disabilities and 45% of parents had adequate knowledge of antenatal/postnatal care and contraceptive use, with 71% of persons with disabilities lacking practical understanding of FP services. Confidence in accessing SRH services was low, as 65% of persons with disabilities and 63% of parents reported negative experiences due to provider behavior and the absence of supportive environments. Only a small fraction (16%) accessed information in disability-friendly formats, and no local government had dedicated

policies, budgets, or directives to support disability-inclusive SRHR services. These findings underscore a significant structural neglect: without intentional adaptation, SRHR programmes risk widening the gap of exclusion rather than promoting empowerment.

Empowerment Through Comprehensive Sexuality Education.

One of the most transformative approaches implemented by BYAN is its Disability-Inclusive Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) programme, grounded in a rights-based and participatory framework. Rather than positioning young persons with disabilities as passive recipients of information, the programme is designed as a pathway to agency, leadership, and systemic change.

The programme is implemented through five interlinked and mutually reinforcing components:

- Rights-Based Training Design and Delivery
- Peer Education and Community Champions
- Accessible IEC Materials and Practical Tools
- Capacity-Building and Mentorship
- Co-Creation and Inclusive Programme Design

Rights-Based Training Design and Delivery. The guiding principle for BYAN's work is that the core content of SRHR does not need to change for persons with disabilities; instead, the delivery methods must be adapted to ensure accessibility. Materials are co-created with persons with disabilities and their representative organisations (OPDs), which ensures that the content is relevant to their lived experiences. For example, content for those with hearing impairments is delivered through visual and text-based formats, while those with visual impairments use tactile models, Braille, and audio resources.

For individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, simplified content, pictorial aids, and guided facilitation are used. This iterative design, informed by continuous participant feedback, ensures the training remains responsive and truly inclusive. Preparatory sessions for youth with intellectual disabilities, for example, enable them to participate alongside their peers, preventing segregation.

Peer Education and Community Champions. A cornerstone of the empowerment model is BYAN's champion programme, further expanded under the RHRN initiative. Since 2023, approximately 40 young people with diverse disabilities, including physical, hearing, visual, intellectual, and autism, have been trained and mobilised as peer educators. Parents of children with autism and intellectual disabilities have also become champions, strengthening family involvement and community support. The selection process is transparent and conducted in collaboration with OPDs to ensure that tokenism is avoided and those selected are genuinely committed and representative.

Accessible IEC Materials and Practical Tools. Inclusive SRHR programming requires more than just information; it needs practical tools that translate abstract concepts into lived understanding. BYAN has developed a suite of interactive materials to achieve this. These include family planning boards with real contraceptives and Braille descriptions, menstrual hygiene demonstrations using pads, tampons, and cups, and pseudo-models of reproductive organs for anatomy lessons and condom use practice. Additionally, they use flipcharts and Picture Exchange Communication (PEC) tools to teach concepts like "safe/unsafe touch," menstrual hygiene, and body parts.

in their own words

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Capacity-Building and Mentorship. Capacity-building in BYAN's model is not a one-time event; it is iterative and sustained. Champions first undergo an intensive five-day CSE training, followed by refresher sessions and ongoing mentorship. Youth with intellectual disabilities have also been integrated into this framework, with the number of trainees increasing from five in 2023 to eleven in 2024, all supported by preparatory sessions and dedicated facilitators. This scaffolding approach proves that meaningful inclusion is possible when content delivery adapts without diluting the rights-based message.

Co-Creation and Inclusive Program Design. BYAN has institutionalised the principle of co-creation through structures such as the Community of Practitioners (COP) and the National Reference Team, which bring together representatives from various disability groups. Collaborative tools like the Easy-to-Read CSE flipchart, Picture Exchange Communication (PEC) Tool with Autism Care Nepal Society, and developing SRHR-related Nepali Sign Language with National Federation of Deaf Nepal (NDFN) are a testament to how partnerships can embed sustainability and authenticity into programming.

Learnings and Implications for

Practice and Policy. BYAN's experience in advancing disability-inclusive SRHR through CSE offers several important learnings:

1. Inclusion is about adaptation, not separation. Accessibility ensures participation becomes substantive rather than symbolic.²
2. Meaningful participation is central to programme relevance, accountability, and sustainability.²
3. Empowered youth function as catalysts for systemic change.²
4. Practical and accessible tools translate rights into lived realities.²
5. Capacity-building must be continuous and supported over time.²

Conclusion. The transition from exclusion to empowerment is vividly illustrated in the stories of young champions who, through rights-based and inclusive programming, have gained confidence, knowledge, and agency. BYAN's work demonstrates that when programmes are co-created, grounded in lived experience, and supported by practical tools and mentorship, young persons with disabilities cease to be passive recipients and become active leaders shaping their own health outcomes. Empowerment is not charity; it is a matter of justice—a recognition of rights that enables every young person to exercise their SRHR fully, safely, and with dignity.

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CAPACITY STRENGTHENING: A Key Entry Point for Sustainable Development

Unlocking Youth Potential. Young people across the world have been key drivers of change and resistance—whether demanding government accountability or fighting for democracy, human rights, and climate justice.

In 2009, young people in the Middle East were hit hard by unemployment, with the youth unemployment rate being twice the global average at that time.¹ What started as a suicidal act by a produce vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, who set himself on fire in front of a government office in 2010 and later died from severe injuries, soon transformed into a violent uprising across the Middle East. A week after Bouazizi's death, Tunisia's government fell due to mass protests. The success of these protests inspired movements against authoritarianism in other countries in the region. The role of a new generation of tech-savvy youth

was crucial in spreading the movement across Arab countries. Young people organised themselves into different forms of entities—youth-driven political parties, non-governmental civil society organisations, and unstructured youth groups—working together to report on developments and violations, mainly through the use of digital technologies.²

In Bangladesh, students were able to overthrow a 15-year-long authoritarian government in 2024 through a movement that began as a fight against the government's bias toward children and grandchildren of 1971 freedom fighters, who were provided a 30% quota in government jobs. Following the use of force against peaceful protesters and the deaths and arrests of innocent students, demonstrators demanded the resignation of those responsible for the violence, including the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh. The protests soon turned into a broader fight for democracy,

becoming a successful case of youth uniting for change and accountability.

The Arab Spring and the Bangladesh student protests are only two occurrences among a myriad of examples involving youth leadership in bringing revolutionary change, including very recent Generation-Z-led political upheavals in Indonesia and Nepal. Three key elements emerge from these cases: (1) the strength of youth collectivisation; (2) innovation and the use of new technology; and (3) the impact of socio-economic development on young people.

1. Strength in the Collectivisation of Young People.

The strength in the sheer number of young people is often underestimated by governments. The world's 1.2 billion young people, accounting for 16% of the global population,³ hold the capacity to challenge the status quo and disrupt faulty systems.¹

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At the same time, young people are often tokenised and used by authorities to demonstrate mass support at rallies, advancing political agendas without recognising youth agency or prioritising youth issues. However, if given the right opportunities and equipped with the right skills, this demographic dividend holds immense potential.

2. Innovation and the Use of New Technology. Young people are inherently innovative. They bring new ideas and are unafraid to try new methods to solve problems. They also constitute the largest population of internet users globally, giving them greater access to information, tools, and networks.⁴ Proper utilisation of young people's innovative skills could generate alternative solutions to many of today's global challenges.

3. Impact of Socio-economic Development on Young People. The world today grapples with multiple developmental challenges—from inequality and climate crisis to pandemics, economic instability, wars, and conflicts. Young people are equally, and in some cases disproportionately, impacted by these challenges. Although the global economy rebounded after the COVID-19 pandemic and youth unemployment is expected to decrease from 13% in 2023 to 12.8% in 2025, rising conflicts continue to put young people's lives and livelihoods at risk.⁵

The job market remains fragile, and many young people feel anxious about economic conditions and their future prospects. Around 20 million youth jobs were at risk globally in 2022 due to proximity to conflict, a figure that has likely increased further by 2025, particularly given conflicts in Asia. Young people are not immune to national and global crises; future generations, in particular, will inherit these unresolved challenges. It is therefore crucial to include young people in policy development and implementation processes that affect them and their

communities. They should be viewed not merely as beneficiaries, but as active agents of change whose voices and lived experiences are essential for sustainable development.

Building Skills and Amplifying Voices for Youth-Led Development. The above provides an overview of the scope and potential of young people in sustainable development. The question then becomes: how do we meaningfully invest in young people and include them in development processes? Investing in youth capacity strengthening and ensuring their participation at decision-making levels are among the simplest yet most crucial steps.

Youth is not a homogenous group. Young people come from diverse socio-political and economic backgrounds, and access to quality education and information and communication technologies (ICTs) varies significantly across geographies and economies. Those with better access are often better equipped to seize opportunities and provide development solutions, while others lag behind. Contrary to common belief, marginalised young people possess valuable knowledge of challenges within their own communities and have the potential to propose effective solutions. When equipped with the necessary skills and resources, they can fully realise this potential.

Investing in youth capacity strengthening through an intersectional approach can generate immediate local solutions while remaining resourceful in the long run. Intergenerational collaboration and capacity strengthening are essential not only for societal continuity but also for innovation. When we invest in younger generations, we also gain opportunities to learn from their lived realities, perspectives, and skills.

Another crucial aspect is recognising young people's agency and ensuring their inclusion in policy spaces. Youth voices matter in shaping development policies

in their own words

that directly affect them. However, young people often lack resources, access to information, and deliberate inclusion by policymakers to meaningfully engage in these spaces.

Integrating Capacity Strengthening and Agency in SRHR and SDGs. ARROW has long applied these approaches in its work on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), combining capacity strengthening with youth participation and agency in policy spaces.

Together with regional co-convenors Youth LEAD and YPEER Asia-Pacific, ARROW has organised the annual Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) Youth Forum since 2017. Since 2022, additional regional youth networks, including the Major Group for Children and Youth and the Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP, have joined this effort. The APFSD Youth Forum engages 400–500 adolescents and young people aged 13–30 each year from across Asia and the Pacific. It is organised ahead of the APFSD, an annual intergovernmental forum supporting regional follow-up and review of progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Since 2017, more than 2,500 young people have participated in the APFSD Youth Forum. Nine regional calls to action and more than 80 country-level and sub-regional calls to action have been developed as outcome documents of these forums. The APFSD Youth Forum serves as a platform for young people to provide substantive recommendations on SDG implementation and gaps, while also building their capacities, strengthening networks, and encouraging peer learning. Through calls to action and engagement with the intergovernmental APFSD, young people have influenced SDG priorities and implementation at national, regional, and global levels.

A very good example of youth-led sustainability action is the emergence of National Youth SDGs Alliances. Alliances in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Mongolia, Nepal (NAYA), and Papua New Guinea have taken leadership in reviewing SDG implementation and engaging at national levels. These alliances actively hold governments accountable for SDG commitments while elevating grassroots youth voices to regional platforms.

Another initiative focused on strengthening youth capacity on SRHR is the InterSEXtionality Webinar Series, which builds the capacities of young people from Myanmar, Nepal, and Benin on SRHR and intersectional issues. Participants use the knowledge gained to advance advocacy at national and international levels, including at the AWID International Forum and the International Conference on Family Planning (ICFP).

Ange-Marie Nicodème Esse, a young changemaker from Benin, writes: *"I now see the invisible: how the intersection of gender, poverty, age, geographic origin or disability creates layers of injustice that conventional approaches fail to capture. It has enabled me to ask a fundamental question at every stage of my work: 'For whom does this project still not work?'"*

The Changemakers Programme was a unique initiative in which young people were provided with skill building workshops with elements of design thinking, social entrepreneurs' mindset, self-efficacy, basic programme management and networking. Participants received seed grants to implement youth-led projects on SRHR, climate change, Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), gender rights and others, using innovative approaches. Several participants were later able to secure additional funding and continue their projects.

Strengthening youth capacity is not merely an investment in individuals; it is a fundamentally anchored approach to sustainable development. Funding cuts, shifting priorities, and geopolitical tensions have already begun to affect youth-focused and youth-led initiatives, with long-term repercussions becoming increasingly visible. We are at a critical juncture where trust in multilateralism is weakening, yet hope for new development frameworks is emerging. In this context, prioritising youth capacity strengthening is not optional—it is a strategic necessity for shaping a more just and sustainable future.

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CSE FOR ALL: Unlocking Wellbeing and Health

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Fostering Collaborations to Advance the CSE Agenda in the Asia-Pacific Region through Multistakeholder Dialogues. Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is central to the Right Here Right Now (RHRN) programme. The programme places strong emphasis on strengthening both the quality and coverage of CSE at national and regional levels. In the Asia-Pacific region, ARROW has been working with country partners within and beyond the RHRN programme to foster collaborations that advance CSE implementation and monitoring, with a particular focus on meaningful and inclusive youth-government engagement.¹

The implementation and monitoring of CSE thrive when joint action-planning processes bring together key stakeholders to engage in dialogue, address needs and concerns, exchange learnings, build trust, and work collaboratively. Such spaces enable the identification and implementation of priority actions that strengthen CSE at local and national levels.

However, how often are such spaces convened? How many of us know whether there is a dedicated platform for discussing CSE implementation—one that brings together governments, UN agencies, and civil society organisations (CSOs) on an equal footing to foster

sustained collaboration? Recognising this gap at the regional level, ARROW created the Regional Multistakeholder Dialogue on CSE—a dedicated platform for youth-government engagement to deliberate on promoting and ensuring the implementation and monitoring of inclusive, rights-based CSE in the Asia-Pacific region.²

First launched in 2018, the Regional Multistakeholder Dialogue on CSE has emerged as a promising learning and advocacy platform. It has contributed to formalising youth participation in policy conversations, strengthening accountability mechanisms, encouraging intergenerational dialogue, and laying

the groundwork for more transparent and responsive policy processes in the region.³

Since 2018, ARROW has worked behind the scenes, leading a growing regional movement to strengthen CSE across Asia and the Pacific. Over the years, ARROW has organised four biennial Regional Multistakeholder Dialogues, each bringing together an increasingly diverse and influential constellation of partners.

The First Regional Multistakeholder Dialogue on CSE (2018). Held on September 6–7, 2018 in Bangkok, the first Regional Multistakeholder Dialogue marked a defining moment that catalysed regional momentum around CSE. Organised in collaboration with UNESCO, UNFPA, RHRN, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the dialogue brought together 90 government officials engaged in national CSE planning and implementation, including senior officials from ministries of education, national CSO representatives, UN agencies, and technical experts from 15 countries in the Asia-Pacific region (Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Mongolia, Maldives, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam).⁴

What distinguished this convening was not only the breadth of representation, but the depth and quality of exchange it generated. Delegates were equipped with the latest evidence and introduced to the key concepts of the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (ITGSE 2018), an evidence-based, rights-based, and youth-centred framework supporting governments, educators, and civil society to advance CSE.⁵ The dialogue facilitated collaboration to strengthen human-rights-based, gender-sensitive CSE programmes and identify opportunities to improve SDG monitoring and reporting on CSE at national levels.

The Second Regional Multistakeholder Dialogue on CSE (2020). The second dialogue was organised in November 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic and was held virtually as the Asia and the Pacific Multistakeholder Dialogue and Exhibition on CSE in the Context of COVID-19, in collaboration with UNESCO and UNFPA. The dialogue gathered 270 government officials, CSOs, UN agencies, and sexuality education partners across the region.⁶

At least six governments—India, Kiribati, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, and the Philippines—participated with Kiribati, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Nepal presenting national best practices in CSE implementation. The dialogue demonstrated strong political commitment to advancing CSE despite pandemic-related disruptions.

The dialogue was paired with the Asia and the Pacific Sexuality Education Virtual Exhibition (APSEVE 2020), the region's first virtual advocacy and learning platform on sexuality education. The exhibition showcased 23 interactive initiatives spanning formal, non-formal, informal, digital, and in-person approaches, and focused on curriculum-based CSE initiatives, digital initiatives and technology-enabled sexuality education initiatives such as games, mobile applications and social media applications that cater to marginalised, underserved young people such as persons with disabilities, gender diverse persons and people living in disaster prone areas.⁷

The exhibition platform remained accessible for five months beyond the dialogue to maximise learning and advocacy to further the implementation of CSE in the region.

The Third Regional Multistakeholder Dialogue on CSE (2022). In 2022, ARROW jointly organised the third dialogue with UNFPA APRO, UNESCO Bangkok, RHRN, and YUWA Nepal as part of the 2nd Asia-Pacific Regional Education Ministers' Conference (APREMC-II). Held virtually on June 3, 2022, the dialogue was themed “Transformative Education Systems for Sustainable Development, Health and Well-being - Comprehensive Sexuality Education - A Crucial Pivot in Asia and the Pacific Region”, it served as a multistakeholder platform which discussed the importance of universal access to CSE implementation within countries in the region from the laws, policies and partnerships perspectives.⁸

The dialogue ensured meaningful engagement of youth-led and youth-serving organisations alongside governments and UN agencies. Nearly 180 policymakers and delegates from 13 countries participated. High-level speakers from the governments of Lao PDR and Mongolia joined CSO and youth-led organisation representatives from India, Nepal, Indonesia, and the Netherlands.

Building on six years of sustained momentum, ARROW organised a regional forum in September 2025 focusing on transforming teachers and teaching for inclusive, high-impact CSE. From September 23–25, ARROW—together with UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA APRO, Education International Asia-Pacific, and youth networks—convened more than 135 government officials, UN representatives, teachers, CSOs, and youth advocates.⁹

With active engagement and inputs from the youth advocates, the forum generated concrete and actionable recommendations to advance CSE through reforms in teacher education systems across South and Southeast Asia.

In conclusion, the biennial Regional Multistakeholder Dialogues on CSE have become a strategic advocacy,

learning, and linking platform in the Asia-Pacific region. By ensuring meaningful participation of civil society, particularly young people alongside governments and UN agencies, the dialogues have strengthened collaboration, accountability, and shared ownership of the CSE agenda.

The dialogues have enabled stakeholders to exchange experiences, identify challenges and opportunities, and translate lessons learned into concrete actions to advance the design and implementation of comprehensive sexuality education across diverse national contexts.

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“CSE is much needed by young people in the region to make the right decisions to lead happier and healthier lives. I hope we can work together to leave no young person behind.”

— Sivananthi Thanenthiran, ARROW

“The revised ITGSE is instrumental in laying the groundwork for children and young people’s access to accurate, age-appropriate knowledge and skills.”

— Maki Hayashikawa, UNESCO

“It is our duty to provide CSE to the next generation so they can enjoy safe, healthy, and respectful relationships and reach their full potential.”

— Dr Josephine Sauvarin, UNFPA APRO

“Having the first hand reach to the education board members from my country, and stakeholders who have been working in CSE implementation for years was an incredible experience for me as a young professional. Until now, I had mostly worked at the grassroots level, engaging directly with beneficiaries. I did not have the reach or network to connect with those who hold significant influence in shaping

and systematising CSE at the policy and programmatic levels.” — WOSSO Fellow

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BUILDING BRIDGES: Young People’s Leadership in SRHR Advocacy and Policy Change

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The socio-political context of Nepal is defined by persistent political instability, shifting alliances between political parties, and a long history of conflict.¹ Since Nepal’s transition to a federal democratic republic and the adoption of the 2015 Constitution, frequent changes in government have affected the country in multiple ways.² Despite economic recovery driven by tourism, remittances, and hydropower, Nepal lacks major investment, resulting in fiscal challenges. At the same time, the country continues to balance its geopolitical relations with regional powers India and China.³

Despite these political and economic challenges, Nepal has demonstrated notable progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).⁴ Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are prioritised under SDG 3 and SDG 5.⁵ However, despite progressive policy and legal provisions to advance SRHR services, Nepal’s sexual and reproductive health indicators reveal significant disparities, particularly among adolescents, rural populations, and marginalised castes.⁶

These disparities are shaped by deeply rooted gender norms and patriarchal practices that influence adolescents’ lives and drive early and forced marriage. The median age at first marriage is 18.3 years for women and 22.3 years for men aged 25 to 49. Men initiate sexual intercourse at a median age of 20.7 years—1.6 years before marriage—while women experience sexual debut and marriage at around 18.3 years. Most women reach menarche at 13. By age 20, 36% of women aged 20–24 have given birth, including 15% by age 18 and 1% by age 15; 14% of women aged 15–19 have already been pregnant. Among married women aged 15–49, 57% use

family planning, with 43% using modern methods. Adolescents face a 31% unmet need for contraception and high discontinuation rates, particularly for pills (67%). Child marriage remains prevalent at 35% before age 18, contributing to adolescent pregnancy, health risks, gender-based violence, and limited educational attainment.⁷

In Nepal, entrenched power dynamics, where disability, gender, poverty, and geography intersect, severely limit access to SRHR. Only 33% of persons with disabilities in Kathmandu report using any SRH services, with women far less likely than men.⁸ Gendered taboos obstruct sexuality education, particularly for girls.⁹ Visually impaired young women face systemic barriers, including inaccessible SRHR information, discrimination in health facilities, and policy neglect.¹⁰ LGBTQIA+ individuals experience stigma, exclusion, and limited access to gender-affirming care, highlighting SRHR as a feminist issue of choice, justice, and dignity.^{11, 12}

These disparities disproportionately affect Nepal's large youth population, which comprises approximately 20.8% of the country. Recognising that young people, especially young women, trans, and non-binary youth, experience these injustices directly and are key agents of change, the Constitution of Nepal enshrines youth participation under Article 51 and allows positive discrimination in favour of youth under Article 18. As a result, youth inclusion has become a near-mandatory principle in policy frameworks. In practice, however, meaningful participation in decision-making, monitoring, and policymaking remains limited, particularly at the local level. Consultations often favours politically affiliated youth, excluding young women, Dalit youth, LGBTQIA+ youth, and rural populations. Barriers such as poverty, migration, corruption, caste and gender

Youth inclusion has become a near-mandatory principle in policy frameworks. In practice, however, meaningful participation in decision-making, monitoring, and policymaking remains limited, particularly at the local level. Consultations often favours politically affiliated youth, excluding young women, Dalit youth, LGBTQIA+ youth, and rural populations.

discrimination, family pressure, nepotism, and unequal access further restrict inclusion. Limited political awareness, generational bias, and polarising social media environments compound these challenges and undermine access to SRHR services.^{13, 14}

Despite these challenges, Nepali youth have historically driven political change through both peaceful and confrontational movements, including the decade-long insurgency and the Madhesh movement. Feminist and rights-based movements such as Occupy Baluwatar (addressing sexual violence) and Enough Is Enough (demanding health-sector transparency) have shaped SRHR discourse by exposing governance failures. Youth-led initiatives, including the Nepal Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) Youth Alliance (NAYA), the National Comprehensive Sexuality Education Advocacy Coalition, Youth-Friendly Local Government (YFLG), and She Change Climate, continue to hold the government accountable. Many young people engage through volunteering, protests, awareness campaigns, and digital activism. While some youth secured elected positions in the 2022 elections, representation at higher levels remains limited.¹⁵

in their own words

Young people's leadership in youth-led movements advocating for policy dialogue and engagement with government institutions has been an uphill struggle against entrenched power structures and generational bias. Navigating bureaucratic systems, accessing decision-making spaces, and overcoming scepticism from policymakers has required resilience, strategic partnerships, and unwavering commitment.

This resilience was evident in June 2020, when young people across Nepal mobilised in peaceful, non-partisan protests demanding improved PCR testing, transparency in COVID-19 spending, and improved quarantine conditions. More recently, Generation Z-led protests against corruption successfully pressured the prime minister to resign, demonstrating the growing influence of grassroots youth activism in driving political reform.

Young people are now actively engaged across all stages of advocacy, from identifying issues to evaluating outcomes. Initiatives such as Break Free! and Stand Up for SRHR have empowered youth to challenge harmful norms and advocate for comprehensive SRHR services. These efforts have contributed to increased youth-friendly services, improved policy frameworks, and stronger community engagement, illustrating the transformative impact of youth-led SRHR advocacy.

This momentum is reflected in the RHRN2 coalition in Nepal, which equips young people with skills to engage in policy processes, influence decision-making, and lead SRHR initiatives at local and national levels. Similarly, NAYA brings together more than 300 young advocates to advance SRHR and inclusive policies through digital advocacy, policy dialogue, and accountability mechanisms, showcasing Nepal's leadership in youth-led SDG action.

Selected quotes:

“RHRN Nepal empowered us through inclusive, youth-led spaces to build skills, express our priorities, and influence SRHR advocacy at community, municipal, national, and regional levels.” — Bipana, RHRN Nepal

“Participating in regional and global forums enabled me to present youth-driven policy demands, build alliances, and engage directly with decision-makers. Representing NAYA and Visible Impact, I gained the confidence and insight to advocate for inclusive, gender-just, and youth-centered development at all levels.” — Manita, NAYA Working Group Member

These youth-led movements demonstrate how determined young people can drive real, lasting SRHR change. Despite conservative resistance, funding gaps, stigma, and uneven access, young people continue to ensure marginalised voices are included. By linking community action with national policymaking, they model rights-based, inclusive, and accountable advocacy, proving that when youth lead with courage and purpose, policy commitments can become equitable realities for all.

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YOUNG PEOPLE LEADING INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS IN THE ASIA AND THE PACIFIC REGION

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Why are Innovations Central to the SRHR Movement? Movement building has long been central to advancing the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) agenda. In the Asia-Pacific region, young people are redefining these movements through new strategies and narratives—not as beneficiaries, but as leaders. As civic space shrinks, SRHR services and information become increasingly commodified, digital divides widen, trust in formal institutions erodes, and efficiency-driven programmes sideline lived experience, it is uncertain how effective traditional approaches will remain. These challenges are further catalysed by rapid digitalisation and capitalist systems.

Youth activists, social entrepreneurs, and community organisers are seeking new pathways to justice, access, and inclusion, particularly in settings where speaking openly about SRHR remains taboo. Their innovations introduce new ways of teaching and learning, sharing power and decision-making, and reaching communities that have been excluded for a long time. These efforts are driving systemic shifts that place rights, dignity, and choice at the centre of development. With young people at the forefront, reclaiming the future through gender-transformative and human-rights-based approaches is urgent. With approximately 750 million young people aged 15–24 globally, their innovative strategies

present vast opportunities amid gender inequality, climate crises, economic fragility, and conflict.¹

Movement building has long been central to advancing the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) agenda. In the Asia-Pacific region, young people are redefining these movements through new strategies and narratives—not as beneficiaries, but as leaders.

From climate justice to education and health access, young innovators across Asia and the Pacific are claiming their future through creative, non-conventional solutions. Some of the most transformative innovations in gender equality and SRHR have emerged through ARROW's sustained engagement with young leaders and advocates. Over the decades, SRHR innovation has evolved from community awareness-raising and behaviour change interventions to localisation of global standards and self-awareness building interventions—diverse yet complementary strategies innovations.

Innovations Across the Region. Early innovations such as self-testing kits for pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections expanded access while ensuring privacy. The Red Cycle Bracelet, which helps track menstrual cycles, is an example of a self-awareness intervention that promotes positive behavioural change and informed reproductive choices. The bracelet has contributed to increased awareness, confidence, and acceptance around menstrual health and hygiene and is now part of Female Community Health Volunteer (FCHV) educational resources in parts of Nepal.²

Sophie Bot, an AI-based conversational tool developed in Kenya, provides sexual health information through dialogue, illustrating how SRHR innovations transcend regions and draw inspiration from shared lived realities.³ Digital fertility and menstrual tracking platforms further enable individuals to understand reproductive health in relation to other wellbeing indicators.

Beyond these tools, programme-based innovations have flourished across communities. These include national peer education initiatives addressing adolescent health in Southeast Asia and community outreach, counselling, HIV prevention, and peer-led support

programmes in Tajikistan.⁴ Such initiatives emphasise accessible, rights-based SRHR information and services, centring dignity and autonomy rather than consumerism.

ARROW's Commitment to Changemakers.

ARROW has strategically engaged young people to strengthen their meaningful leadership in SRHR at regional and global levels, including through the ARROW RHRN Changemakers Programme. Launched in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the programme identified 63 young people from across the region to develop solutions grounded in local SRHR realities. Sixteen ideas received seed grants to begin implementation in the first phase.

Over time, the programme has expanded significantly. To date, 153 young people have participated, with 24 innovative ideas receiving seed grants to scale their initiatives. These efforts have generated impactful solutions in comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), information dissemination, advocacy, and rights-based programming, particularly for marginalised populations, including adolescents, persons with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, and persons with disabilities. The programme demonstrated that young people can be powerful political catalysts when investment, trust, and power-sharing are prioritised.

As the programme grew, the need for platforms to showcase youth innovation became evident. This led to the Asia and the Pacific Sexuality Education Virtual Exhibition (APSEVE) in 2020, which featured diverse formal, non-formal, informal, digital, and in-person sexuality education initiatives across the region.

Building on this momentum, ARROW has hosted Innovations for SDGs – Youth at the Forefront in Asia and the

in their own words

Pacific annually during the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) Youth Forum. These exhibitions highlight how young people blend social innovation, entrepreneurial mindset and intersectionality concepts to assert the political significance of SRHR despite funding constraints, shrinking civic space, and limited recognition.

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In 2024, 19 innovative approaches by 17 young people from 10 countries were featured. In 2025, 18 innovations from 18 innovators representing 10 countries were showcased. Some of these innovations were in the planning phase, while some were in the first phase of immersion and some others had already become experts of their sectors.

Stories of Young Innovators:

Digital SETARA - Indonesia. Digital SETARA emerged in response to COVID-19 and limited access to CSE in Indonesia, where CSE is not mandatory in schools. Developed by Yayasan Gemilang Sehat Indonesia (YGSi), this online platform addresses time and access constraints associated with face-to-face learning. Using interactive quizzes, images, audio tools, and games, Digital SETARA has become a trusted resource for teachers and students. Its reach

in their own words

expanded from 17 schools in six districts in 2023 to more than 200 schools in six districts by 2025.

Findings from the Global Early Adolescents Study Indonesia indicate that rights-based SRHR education through SETARA strengthened adolescents' communication skills and sustained learning outcomes even after the intervention period.⁵

Artivism Academy – Pakistan.

Innovation extends beyond technology, as demonstrated by Artivism Academy, founded by Joshua Dilwar in Lahore, Pakistan. Emerging from his journey as an ARROW changemaker, the academy uses art-based advocacy, including theatre, filmmaking, open-mic sessions, comics, and animation, to engage communities on sensitive issues such as SRHR and life-skills-based education (LSBE). By 2023, the academy reached 600 beneficiaries across three districts of Punjab, illustrating how creative approaches can shift power and dismantle traditional barriers.

CSE Resources for Young People with Disabilities – BYAN Nepal.

Blind Youth Association Nepal (BYAN) developed accessible CSE materials, including tactile tools, easy-to-read guides, and large-print resources. These materials challenge the misconception that persons with disabilities are asexual or do not have sexual and reproductive health needs and position BYAN as a key SRHR resource hub in Nepal, reshaping narratives around disability and sexuality.

My Body, My Rights and Project

Tamanna – India. Sanjina Gupta, founder of Rangeen Khidki Foundation, piloted My Body, My Rights through the Changemakers Initiative in 2020. The programme delivers scientific, feminist, pleasure-affirmative, rights-based CSE to rural adolescents. By 2025, the programme expanded to six villages

in South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, reaching over 3,700 adolescents, youth, and caregivers.

Its school-based component, Project Tamanna, focuses on child sexual abuse prevention, consent, bodily autonomy, puberty education, SRHR basics, and digital safety. By September 2025, it was active in nine government schools, reaching over 3,000 adolescent girls.

My Life, Mere Faisle – India. My Life, Mere Faisle (“My Life, My Decisions”), implemented by Pravah, empowers young people, especially girls, to exercise agency and challenge gender norms. The programme has enabled over 5,500 young leaders and directly reached more than 40,000 youth through a network of 350 partners, strengthening decision-making and negotiation skills.

Why Should Young People be Trusted

with SRHR Innovations? Mistrust of young people reflects adultism, power imbalance, and structural exclusion. Yet youth-led innovations are critical to achieving SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and ICPD+30 commitments to centre youth and gender equality for development. Young innovators bring lived experience, challenge taboos, bridge generational divides, and leverage digital and cultural fluency into inclusive development.

Despite tangible impact, youth-led initiatives face limited funding, scrutiny, lack of recognition, and short-term investment cycles. Sustaining their work requires institutional support and trust, mentorship, flexible funding, and meaningful inclusion in decision-making. Governments must dismantle bureaucratic and age-based barriers, funding agencies must invest in youth-led ideas, and civil society must ensure meaningful inclusion of young people as partners.

Investing in youth-led, gender-responsive innovation is an investment towards a just and sustainable world. As the region moves toward 2030, we must ensure that young people have a seat at the table, capacity and the resources to build the future for themselves.

From digitalising education to ensuring accessible and adequate information, from converging energy with playing to utilising ancient wisdom and practises for daily life activities, young people have shown their potential of not only creating innovative solutions but also inspiring social change. The momentum of youth discoveries and solutions is only ever-growing, and it is essential that we facilitate the space, resources and commitment to young people's ideas of change.

These innovations and many more are highlighted in the **Innovations for SDGs** booklet produced by ARROW, accessed here:⁶ <https://arrow.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/APFSD-Youth-Forum-Innovations-Booklet-2024-2025.pdf>.

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CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO: *Changemakers Advancing CSE*

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The status quo, as French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir observed, shapes our understanding of gender from birth. Her famous assertion that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” remains profoundly relevant in contemporary India, where gender roles and sexuality education continue to be constrained by norms that are centuries old. Yet, across the subcontinent’s diverse landscape of caste, class, and religious communities, a quiet revolution is taking place—one that recognises the urgent need for contextual, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) that speaks to the lived realities of India’s most marginalised populations.

This shift is not only pedagogical but also political. It challenges long-standing barriers that have kept tribal and forest-dwelling communities at the margins of health information and bodily autonomy. These barriers continue to uphold caste-patriarchal hierarchies by denying diverse young people the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about their bodies and lives.

The Educational Crisis Behind the Numbers. India’s educational landscape reveals stark disparities that extend far beyond basic literacy. This is not merely an education issue but a fundamental rights issue, encompassing the Right to Education, the Right to Information, and the Right to Health. According to the Ministry of Education, over one million children remain out of school in the 2024–25 academic year, with 36% of girls and boys dropping out before completing elementary education.

Rural areas present particularly concerning trends. Approximately 70% of India’s population lives in rural

communities, where 69% of out-of-school children are concentrated. This creates a compounding effect: those furthest from educational resources are also the least likely to receive comprehensive sexuality education.

This educational vacuum is especially acute in tribal and forest-dwelling communities, where basic necessities such as clean drinking water and electricity often remain elusive. In these contexts, reproductive health is frequently viewed as a luxury rather than a fundamental right, creating dangerous knowledge gaps that leave young people, particularly girls, vulnerable to health risks, early marriage, and cycles of poverty.

While there is no shortage of books, articles, podcasts, and videos on reproductive health, very few are designed for people living in tribal communities. Most available resources assume literacy, digital access, and infrastructure that are not realities for many forest-dwelling populations. These gaps reinforce what is often described as the “3As” problem: lack of accessibility, availability, and affordability.

The ARROW Experience: Building Changemakers. The transformative power of targeted intervention became evident through the ARROW (Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women) Changemakers Programme, which builds the capacities of young educators to develop sustainable solutions to deeply entrenched social problems, including reproductive health inequities, gender-based violence, and systemic barriers to bodily autonomy. Through structured capacity development focused on contextual education

strategies, policy advocacy, and community mobilisation, the programme equips changemakers with practical tools while remaining attentive to cultural contexts.

The structured sessions and insights drawn from real-life experiences added significant value to my own thinking. The Changemakers Programme came at the very beginning of my entrepreneurial journey, offering a space to ask difficult questions about my inhibitions, passions, the challenges I was facing, and the change I sought to create.

My journey began in the forested regions of northern India, where I worked with *Van Gujjar* and other forest communities, where conversations about reproductive health were virtually non-existent. The *Van Gujjars* are a semi-nomadic community traditionally engaged in buffalo herding and forest-based livelihoods, primarily residing in the Shivalik Hills and Terai regions. Their mobility and forest-dependent lifestyle limit access to schools and health services, while cultural silence around the body—rooted in both traditional norms and systemic neglect—restricts knowledge transmission across generations.

The challenge was not merely linguistic but deeply cultural. How does one introduce concepts of bodily autonomy and reproductive health in communities where discussing the female body remains taboo? I grappled with this question during the capacity-building sessions of the Changemakers Programme. Access to a network of peers working in similar contexts became an invaluable source of support, particularly during difficult moments.

The Power of Contextual Education.

The breakthrough came with the realisation that comprehensive sexuality education must be accompanied by another crucial “C”: contextual. This approach, which I term Contextual Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CCSE), recognises that one-size-fits-all curricula often fail to resonate with diverse communities. “Contextual” means adapting content, language, imagery, and pedagogical methods to align with lived experiences, cultural frameworks, and communication styles, ensuring that sexuality education is accessible, relevant, and culturally respectful rather than imposed from dominant urban or caste perspectives. Understanding context requires empathy, a willingness to decode problems, and the ability to create personalised solutions.

Building trust began with the most fundamental anatomical education. In many communities, basic information about the female body was missing due to systemic educational exclusion, cultural taboos that prevented intergenerational knowledge sharing, and the absence of accessible health services. Learning that the female body has three distinct outlets: urinary, vaginal, and anal, was often groundbreaking. These conversations, infused with humor and cultural sensitivity, gradually opened doors to more complex discussions on menstruation, reproductive health, and bodily autonomy.

The development of contextual educational materials became critical. Traditional literacy-based approaches often excluded community members, as they were designed for urban, dominant-language, and dominant-caste audiences. Working closely with communities, I co-created doodle storybooks and interactive visual materials to convey information on menstruation, reproductive health, and bodily autonomy. These tools proved especially

effective in low-literacy settings, enabling engagement through accessible and culturally relevant imagery.

One year after the programme, a young woman—a mother of three—shared with me, “For the first time, I was able to speak openly with a doctor about my gynaecological concerns instead of staying silent. I knew what to say and how to explain exactly where I was experiencing the problem.” This moment powerfully illustrates the impact of CCSE.

Innovative Approaches in Menstrual Health. Menstrual health education serves as a key entry point for CCSE in these communities. My work as a changemaker has focused extensively on menstrual health and hygiene with women and adolescent girls, emphasising locally grounded solutions and behavioral change practices. Through Samanta Foundation, we address adolescent and menstrual health by building the capacities of youth and women, particularly in contexts where physical and emotional well-being and personal hygiene are often neglected.

Our approach combines multiple interventions. Through platforms such as YouTube and community engagement programmes, we developed a digital outreach strategy complemented by village-level screenings and interactive sessions. These efforts demonstrate how digital tools can meaningfully support grassroots education. Our work with *Van Gujjar* women, documented through community memoirs, highlights how sustained engagement leads to lasting behavioral change rather than temporary awareness.

Unlike one-off workshops, our approach involves multiple touchpoints over six to 12 months, allowing communities to internalise and adapt health practices at their own pace. We also introduced a WhatsApp chatbot, Project First Step, to bridge gaps in reproductive health

information by offering private, easily accessible support while respecting community norms around confidentiality.

The Technology-Tradition Bridge.

Sexuality education in marginalised communities is most effective when it builds on what people already know and trust. In many forest and tribal areas, traditional stories and art shape how girls learn about their bodies. To work within this context, I created doodle books that blend cultural elements with simple, accurate information on menstruation and reproductive health.

One doodle story features a forest girl who explains menstrual cycles using metaphors drawn from forest life, comparing the monthly cycle to seasonal rhythms. This approach allowed complex biological processes to be discussed while respecting cultural narratives familiar to the community.

These visual tools address multiple barriers simultaneously: they overcome literacy limitations, respect cultural communication styles, offer natural conversation starters, and transcend language barriers through visual storytelling. While digital tools such as Project First Step expanded access, we remained mindful of privacy concerns in contexts where phones are often shared among family members.

Scaling Impact Through Community Leadership.

Sustained change emerges when leadership is built within the community itself. Rather than relying on external educators, CCSE programmes prioritise identifying trusted women and supporting them to become local educators. This approach ensures that sexuality education continues beyond formal sessions.

Over the past three years, we have trained 45 community health champions across 12 villages, reaching approximately 1,200 women and adolescent girls. Follow-up

visits and observation-based assessments indicate a 60% increase in menstrual hygiene practices and a 40% rise in healthcare-seeking behavior. These leaders understand local dynamics, speak community languages, and navigate cultural sensitivities more effectively than outside facilitators.

The Path Forward. As India continues to grapple with educational inequities and health disparities, the need for contextual sexuality education is increasingly urgent. Grassroots experiences demonstrate that effective CSE must be built from the

ground up, grounded in local realities and sustained community engagement. CCSE is not merely good practice; it is a necessary response to systemic exclusion that perpetuates marginalisation and denies fundamental rights.

The journey from basic anatomical awareness to comprehensive sexuality education is neither quick nor easy, but it is essential. Each conversation that breaks a taboo, each doodle that makes knowledge familiar, and each community leader who confidently shares information contributes to a broader shift

in how knowledge is accessed and who feels entitled to it.

The status quo may be deeply entrenched, but the work of changemakers across India shows that even the most marginalised communities can move toward liberation when education makes sense in their context and support extends beyond a single workshop. True change happens not when education is imposed from above, but when communities are empowered to claim their collective right to knowledge, health, and autonomy on their own terms.

CTRL+ALT+CSE

How Young People Are Shaping Digital Conversations for Comprehensive Sexuality Education

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“Now that you all have taught the students about sex education, we will not have to teach them anything at all.”

Back in 2019, I was at a community school in Bhaktapur, Nepal, as part of a group of young people engaging in peer-to-peer education on comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). One of our target groups was school-going students.

After we finished a session with students from Grade 7, their teacher approached us to thank us for our efforts. “Now that you all have taught the students about sex education, we will not have to teach them anything at all,” he said. His comment, intended as praise, unintentionally illuminated a troubling reality.

Fifteen years earlier, during my own school days, conversations about sex, sexuality, and gender were virtually non-existent. While schools did offer

biology lessons, they focused only on cells and pregnancy; the nuances of relationships, emotional well-being, and consent were rarely discussed.

Like many peers across Asia and the Pacific, my generation was left to navigate the complex realities of sexual and reproductive health through whispers, dubious sources, and anxiety about the unknown. We did not realise then how severe the consequences of such a void could be. Research shows that the absence of CSE contributes to higher risks of unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, uninformed decision-making, and violations of rights.¹ A lack of such education can leave young people vulnerable to unintended pregnancy, STIs, violence, and coercion.²

As I grew older, a cousin revealed that some of us, as children, had been sexually abused by a relative. Anxiety—the fear

of the unknown—followed, because even when I learned what had happened, I could not navigate my emotions. I felt lost, still wondering how I was supposed to understand the experience or how I was supposed to feel.

That inability to process my emotions became the driving force behind my involvement in conversations around CSE. It led me to peer-to-peer education and eventually to places like Bhaktapur. Ensuring sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for young people is now my passion.

Beyond Cultural Taboos: A Rights and Health Issue. The issue stemming from the lack of CSE extends beyond Nepal’s cultural taboos. It is both a human rights and public health concern and is closely linked to Sustainable Development Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and 4 (Quality Education).³

Many young people in Asia and the Pacific—home to nearly 60% of the world's youth—are affected by the lack of CSE in formal schooling. When education systems, like the one I experienced, fail to provide essential information, young people are left with unanswered questions.

When Such Crucial Information is Unavailable, Young People Turn to the Internet. In 2022, an estimated 73% of young people aged 15 to 24 in the region had internet access, earning them the label “the internet generation.”⁴ This highly connected group actively seeks answers online, often from questionable sources, highlighting the urgent need for robust CSE and credible online resources.

This digital reality provides an entry point for understanding how young people access information and how evidence-based CSE can be amplified online. Technology can influence decision-making, raise awareness, and mobilise support for positive change—this is digital advocacy.

Online spaces have become primary environments for socialisation and can be leveraged to address risks and inequalities related to young people's health and well-being. Digital advocacy offers immediate, scalable, collaborative, and decentralised ways to reach young people.

Finding Our Voices Online: The Power of Digital Advocacy. Information is no longer confined to books or classrooms. Many people now consume content through digital and social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. These platforms have transformed CSE into interactive, publicly visible, and instantly shareable content with mass reach.

This shift has contributed to the rise of digital activism, described as “the use of digital network infrastructure for activism.”⁵ Digital activism enables campaigns to reach audiences across regions and allows movements advancing sexuality education and SRHR to grow. Topics once restricted to books, medical journals, and hushed conversations are now openly discussed, thanks to digital media affordances that allow users to create, interact, collaborate, and amplify information.

Technology can influence decision-making, raise awareness, and mobilise support for positive change—this is digital advocacy—offering immediate, scalable, collaborative, and decentralised ways to reach young people.

One example is the TikTok account @sexedu, which destigmatises conversations around sex and sexuality through peer-to-peer education.⁶ In Indonesia, the organisation Yayasan Gemilang Sehat Indonesia (YGSI) transitioned its print-based CSE materials into an e-learning platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. The platform includes quizzes, images, audio, and games and is the first digital CSE learning module of its kind in the country.⁷

Youth innovators are also developing mobile applications that offer gamified learning tools on consent and relationship dynamics. One such app, Strong Girls Strong Nation, developed by Beautiful Hearts Against Sexual Violence in Mongolia, focuses on preventing sexual violence. The application includes age-appropriate quizzes for children aged 3 to 18 and addresses sensitive topics such as incest, sexual assault, harassment, and violence in homes, public spaces, schools, and workplaces.

These approaches have transformed content consumption into active, self-directed learning. E-learning platforms and some social media spaces also offer anonymity, which is particularly beneficial for marginalised young people who may feel unsafe or targeted in traditional classrooms.

The #CSE4ALL Campaign. Against this backdrop of innovation and the urgent need to ensure CSE for all, the #CSE4ALL campaign was born. A group of young people from across Asia and the Pacific positioned themselves at the forefront of digital advocacy to increase public support for their SRHR. Their aim was to help change attitudes, improve policies, and strengthen advocacy for the implementation of CSE—both within and beyond educational settings.

The #CSE4ALL campaign focuses on the demand for CSE, its implementation, and equitable access for young people in all their diversities. The messages and voices shared through the campaign reflect key demands raised by young people in human rights advocacy spaces at regional and global levels. Since its launch, the campaign has reached approximately 1.5 million people digitally. From Farzana in Bangladesh urging prioritisation of gender equality, human rights, CSE, and SRHR, to Rita in Nepal advocating for marginalised communities' access to CSE, young people have actively embraced and shaped this movement.

Let's talk about the Future. Campaigns like #CSE4ALL create opportunities to ensure that CSE is no longer treated as a taboo, but recognised as a fundamental right for young people in all their diversities. The objective is to continue building public support and shifting attitudes so that CSE is accessible and available to all young people—both online and in person.

The digital landscape offers immense potential. As young advocates and organisations continue their digital activism, evidence-based information can help dismantle long-standing taboos around “sex education.” This is a long process, as seeds grow into saplings before becoming trees, but reflecting on my experience in that classroom in Bhaktapur, where students gradually opened up, I remain hopeful. Young people can be empowered to make informed decisions about their bodies, relationships, and futures.

Recommendations:

1. **Invest** in digital CSE through safe, inclusive online spaces.
2. **Provide** funding and mentorship for young people developing innovative digital CSE initiatives.
3. **Strengthen** multi-stakeholder collaboration among young people, civil society, and governments to support digital CSE advocacy.
4. **Address** misinformation with clear, engaging, evidence-based digital content.
5. **Collaborate** with young influencers, digital creators, and trained peer educators to produce CSE content on platforms popular with young people.

in their own words

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monitoring national and regional activities

FROM TABOO TO POLICY: Monitoring the SRHR Landscape in Indonesia

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In recent years, Indonesia has witnessed a transformative shift in its approach to Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). Unlike many nations that have explicitly rolled back rights, Indonesia has simultaneously advanced protection. Indonesia has committed to global goals of reducing maternal mortality, preventing early marriage, and expanding adolescent SRHR access.¹ However, these aspirations are frequently undermined by conflicting domestic political narratives.

Shifting Policies: From National

Mandates to Local Action. While national regulations such as the Sexual Violence Crimes Law (UU TPKS) and the 2023 Health Law provide a crucial umbrella for rights, the true test of implementation lies at the district level.

Policy developments in districts like Langkat, Jombang, and Indramayu illustrate that SRHR is moving from a taboo topic to a governance priority.

In Jombang, advocacy by youth-led coalitions such as Aliansi Inklusi Jombang (AIJ) contributed directly to the passage of Peraturan Bupati Jombang No. 103/2023 on Reproductive Health,² a regulation that mandates youth participation in policymaking, institutionalises capacity-building for young people, and establishes a multi-sectoral SRHR forum at the regency level.

In Langkat, village leadership has embraced SRHR through practical commitments. Leaders such as Pak Alpin, the Head of Tugu Village, have integrated SRHR into local policy—legitimising youth organisations such

as CIKAL through village decrees and allocating village budgets for adolescent health programmes. This shift signifies a move from ad hoc youth initiatives to structurally supported, government-backed CSE advocacy.³

Meanwhile, Indramayu has strengthened adolescent-friendly services through district circulars encouraging village budget allocations. These policy instruments, though localised, lay the groundwork for embedding CSE into routine governance, offering models for replication across the country.

Changing Public Discourse: Youth as Strategic Actors. Discussions of SRHR are increasingly recognised as beneficial to community wellbeing. In Jombang, the advocacy of youth-led coalitions such as AIJ contributed directly to the passage of

Peraturan Bupati Jombang No. 103/2023 on Reproductive Health.⁴ This regulation is a landmark achievement because it mandates youth participation in policy processes and institutionalises a multi-sectoral SRHR forum. In Langkat, village leaders legitimised youth organisations like CIKAL through formal village decrees, backed by specific village budget allocations (APBDes) for adolescent health programmes and by the passage of Peraturan Daerah Kabupaten Langkat No. 3/2025 on the Implementation of Reproductive Health Education for Adolescents.³

The success of these shifts owes much to the strategic positioning of youth within the movement. RHRN2 has played a catalytic role by moving beyond traditional awareness-raising into structured capacity development, advocacy skill-building, and policy engagement. Youth groups now enter policy spaces equipped not only with demands but also with policy briefs, evidence, and proposals aligned to local governance systems.

The success of these policies was not accidental. It was the result of youth shifting from external petitioners to institutional co-creators. Through the RHRN2 programme, youth advocates employed three top-line interventions to achieve these legislative wins:

- **Structural Bridges via Musrenbang:** Accreditation of youth groups to participate in Musrenbang (Development Planning Forums) shifted youth from observers to active participants with the power to influence local by-laws and budget planning.
- **Normative Reframing:** Advocates strategically reframed CSE as a pragmatic solution to key development goals, specifically child marriage prevention and stunting reduction. This allowed religious leaders and village heads to support SRHR

initiatives without feeling they were compromising traditional values.

- **Fiscal Sustainability:** Securing binding local budget allocations (APBDes) ensures that advocacy gains translate into concretely funded, sustainable action rather than one-off events.

These elements demonstrate that RHRN2's role goes beyond isolated wins—it strategically shifts the environment in which CSE is negotiated and implemented.

The Critical Perspective: Persistent Barriers. Despite these significant policy gains, the landscape remains uneven, and the transition from taboo to policy is not linear. Youth advocates continue to face entrenched resistance and systemic barriers:

- **Cultural and Normative Pushback:** Deeply embedded patriarchal norms continue to challenge implementation. Even where regulations exist, women's reproductive autonomy remains constrained by familial and social structures.⁵ Youth advocates also encounter conservative factions who perceive SRHR as incompatible with religious norms, requiring careful negotiation of language and framing.⁶
- **Capacity and Motivation Gaps:** While regulations mandate support, frontline providers often lack the skills to implement them. Teachers often report discomfort discussing sexuality, viewing it as taboo. Similarly, health workers frequently lack trauma-informed care training, contributing to victim-blaming attitudes that deter youth from seeking care.⁶
- **Systemic Fragmentation:** A major hurdle is the lack of coordination between agencies. National monitoring has shown that school task forces often lack connection to health services or psychosocial support, leaving students with theoretical protection but no practical referral pathways.⁷

The success of these policies was not accidental. It was the result of youth shifting from external petitioners to institutional co-creators. Through the RHRN2 programme, youth advocates employed top-line interventions to achieve legislative wins.

Conclusion. Indonesia's SRHR landscape has fundamentally changed. The existence of formal regulations shows that SRHR is no longer an untouchable subject. However, the existence of policy is only the beginning. The RHRN2 model demonstrates that closing the implementation gap requires empowering youth as credible institutional actors who can navigate between progressive policy and conservative social norms.

Sustaining this progress will require maintaining these structural bridges, ensuring that youth seats at the planning table and budget allocations remain permanent features of local governance.

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SEEDS OF CHANGE: Five Years of Young People-Led SRHR Advocacy in Bangladesh

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Bangladesh has made significant progress in maternal health, yet broader aspects of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) remain constrained by social norms, stigma, and misinformation. Seeking sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services is often viewed by parents as evidence of sexual behavior, risking the reputation of their child.¹ As a result, the broader dimensions of SRHR for both boys and girls remain neglected. Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) continues to be stigmatised, leaving adolescents vulnerable despite their demographic significance.²

In response, youth-led movements such as the Right Here, Right Now 2 (RHRN2) Bangladesh Coalition have emerged to bridge these gaps by amplifying young people's voices in decision-making and influencing health and education systems.³

The government has an action plan to ensure adolescent-friendly health services nationwide, yet frontline providers remain underprepared.

Recognising these gaps, youth under RHRN2 exposed cases of negligence in local health centres. Their findings, amplified by national media, prompted authorities to take corrective measures and improve staff accountability.

Advocacy for Menstrual Hygiene Management at School. Despite progress in recent decades, SRHR continues to face strong backlash. For example, the RHRN2 Bangladesh coalition initiated a campaign with young boys to challenge their perceptions of menstruation. This campaign faced attacks from fundamentalist groups who questioned why a “private issue” such as menstruation was being discussed with men, accusing the initiative of disrespecting women.⁴

In Joypurhat and Lalmonirhat districts, youth advocates prioritised menstrual health in schools and communities. Their persistent engagement with local leaders resulted in the distribution of thousands of sanitary napkins, installation of medicated boxes in schools and *madrassas*, and commitments to increase budgets for adolescent health.⁵ These initiatives helped dispel deeply rooted stigmas and enabled girls to attend school confidently during their periods. Such achievements demonstrate how youth-led advocacy can hold policymakers accountable and trigger lasting change in SRHR at the grassroots level.

Health facility monitoring by youths to ensure adolescent-friendly health services. The government has an action plan to ensure adolescent-friendly health services nationwide, yet frontline providers remain underprepared.⁵ Lack of sensitisation, inadequate supervision, and reluctance to adopt new practices have left service gaps—especially in local health facilities. Young people often hesitate to seek services due to social norms and fear of judgment from health care staff.

Recognising these gaps, youth under RHRN2 exposed cases of negligence in local health centres.⁶ Their findings, amplified by national media, prompted authorities to take corrective measures and improve staff accountability.⁷

Youth groups also found that CSE content was being skipped in schools due to taboos and teacher discomfort. They interviewed students, teachers, and parents, gathered evidence from 50 schools and *madrassas*, and met with District Education Officers (DEOs). Their persistence resulted in seven DEOs issuing formal directives requiring schools under their jurisdiction to teach CSE as mandated by the national curriculum.⁸ From local mayors and MPs to school principals and journalists, young people have built bridges with actors who once seemed out of reach.

Challenges. From the outset of implementation, RHRN2 faced significant backlash—both in communities and across social media. Fundamentalist groups and anti-rights movements targeted the initiative, particularly after the political shift of 2024, which intensified resistance and reversed earlier gains.⁹ Criticism also focused on the inclusion of SOGIESC communities and the portrayal of transgender characters in schoolbooks.

In response to increasing risks, the project adopted a low-profile approach. Youth engagement had to be limited for safety, and media visibility declined. These constraints disrupted project achievements, yet local youth remained resilient. Grounded in evidence and shaped by lived experience, young people continued advocating for their rights—

even when their voices had to be quieter for safety.

Conclusion. Bangladesh stands at a critical point in advancing SRHR. Social stigma, political shifts, and rising anti-rights movements threaten to undermine years of progress. Silence around SRHR continues to place young people, especially the marginalised, at risk unless coordinated action is taken.

Despite these challenges, young people offer hope through their genuine

intentions. Their persistence, insight, and leadership show that they are not merely beneficiaries but essential drivers of change. What they need now is sustained support, protection, and investment. Empowering young people to claim their SRHR is not only a matter of rights but a cornerstone for building a healthier, more inclusive, and resilient Bangladesh.

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SEEDS OF CHANGE: Five Years of Youth-led SRHR Advocacy in Nepal under RHRN2

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Over the past decade, the landscape of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in Nepal has gradually evolved from a peripheral issue to a topic of national discourse. As a signatory to the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and its 2014 review, Nepal committed to advancing adolescent and youth SRHR, including access to CSE. In Nepal, CSE components have been embedded in the "Health Education" subject since 2000; however, implementation remains fragmented, with the subject being optional at the secondary level.¹ Against this backdrop, youth-led advocacy through the Right Here Right Now 2 (RHRN2) partnership has played a catalytic role in advancing SRHR- and CSE-related discourse at both national and local levels.

The first-ever National CSE Conference created a bold space to affirm young people's right to SRHR. The conference concluded with a Government Declaration prioritising CSE in the curriculum and increasing teacher training programmes on CSE.

RHRN Nepal has worked relentlessly to dismantle taboos, push for inclusive policies, and build solidarity in the face of resistance and shrinking civic space. RHRN2 coalition members have actively participated in policy dialogues, consultations, and review meetings with government stakeholders, as well as teacher trainings—elevating discussions around making "Health Education" a compulsory subject, integrating CSE more comprehensively into the curriculum, and expanding teacher training initiatives.

The first-ever National CSE Conference, held in March 2023 in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), and co-organised by RHRN members, created a bold space to affirm young people's right to SRHR.² The conference concluded with a Government Declaration prioritising CSE in the curriculum and increasing teacher training programmes on CSE. This declaration is now being used as a reference for advocacy at both local and national levels. Importantly, discussions also addressed the long-term sustainability of these commitments, emphasising the need for institutionalised funding, strengthened inter-ministerial coordination, continuous teacher capacity-building, and monitoring mechanisms. Since then, the CSE Technical Working Group, chaired by the government, has been mapping progress on CSE interventions in coordination with UNFPA and CSOs to strengthen alignment with government priorities.

Nepal's SRHR landscape has made important strides over the past decade, reflecting commitments under ICPD and subsequent reviews. These include progressive policy commitments, growing recognition of CSE as a right, and localised reforms that have begun to bridge access gaps.

Similarly, the coalition actively engaged in the revision of the National Youth Policy in collaboration with the National Youth Council. Through inclusive provincial and national consultations, youth advocates pushed for stronger SRHR provisions, ensuring that the revised policy reflects the diverse realities and rights of young people.

Nepal's federal structure offers a unique opportunity, as local governments have the authority to develop their own curricula. This has opened important avenues for integrating CSE at the local level, even as national curriculum reform progresses. In the Godawari Municipality of Dhangadhi, the RHRN coalition successfully lobbied for the inclusion of CSE in the local curriculum, leading to its formal adoption by the local government.

Local governments have also begun to institutionalise SRHR priorities through financial commitments. Municipalities such as Chayanath (Mugu), Inaruwa (Sunsari), and Itahari (Sunsari) have allocated dedicated budgets for SRHR- and CSE-related programmes, reflecting the impact of youth-led advocacy. Youth advocates have also participated in budget planning and implementation processes. Through dialogue with municipal authorities, they have advocated for the inclusion of youth-friendly SRHR services and education in local plans and budgets. This process

not only strengthened accountability but also ensured that SRHR efforts were responsive to community needs, increasing sustainability and local ownership.

RHRN Nepal has engaged in collaborative advocacy with broader SRHR alliances, including the National CSE Advocacy Coalition and the National APFSD Youth Alliance, while also actively participating in international advocacy spaces such as the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD), the Commission on the Status of Women, the International Conference on Family Planning (ICFP), and the Summit of the Future. These combined efforts have reinforced calls for meaningful youth engagement and the advancement of SRHR and gender equality.

While RHRN2 achieved critical gains, the movement faced significant obstacles. Frequent leadership changes and departmental restructuring among government stakeholders hindered continuity and progress. The absence of a consistent focal person required RHRN2 to repeatedly reintroduce its work and re-establish relationships, resulting in delays and diluted advocacy momentum. Additionally, procedural requirements, such as signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) merely to schedule meetings, posed further barriers to timely collaboration.

Policymakers also continue to show hesitation in fully endorsing gender-transformative and inclusive CSE. A major challenge remains the lack of intersectoral coordination, particularly between the MoHP and MoEST. Nepal's National Adolescent Health and Development Strategy (NADHS), developed by the MoHP, identifies access to CSE in schools as a key priority.⁴ However, during advocacy meetings based on this strategy, government stakeholders often assume that

responsibility lies solely with the MoEST because of the education-focused nature of the intervention.

Nepal's SRHR landscape has made important strides over the past decade, reflecting commitments under ICPD and subsequent reviews. These include progressive policy commitments, growing recognition of CSE as a right, and localised reforms that have begun to bridge access gaps. Within this context, the RHRN2 partnership has been catalytic in shifting discourse, equipping young leaders, and influencing national and local policy spaces. Youth-led advocacy has not only challenged stigma and policy inertia but has also contributed to tangible progress—shaping curriculum discussions, supporting local governments to integrate CSE, securing municipal budget allocations, and influencing national policy revisions. Nevertheless, fragmented curriculum implementation, weak inter-ministerial coordination, and social resistance to inclusive content continue to limit the full realisation of young people's SRHR.⁵

Moving forward, Nepal's SRHR agenda will require the institutionalisation of CSE in schools, expansion of inclusive services, and sustainable government financing. The past five years show that youth-led advocacy is not merely complementary but essential to advancing national SRHR goals. The foundations laid by RHRN2 show that when young people are empowered, they can accelerate progress toward a more equitable and rights-affirming future.

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RESOURCES FROM THE ARROW SRHR KNOWLEDGE SHARING CENTRE

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ARROW's SRHR Knowledge Sharing Centre (ASK-us) hosts a special collection of resources on gender, women's rights, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) to make critical information on these topics accessible to all. ASK-us is also available online at <http://www.srhr-ask-us.org/>.

ARTICLES AND BOOKS

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). *The International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (ITGSE)*. <https://unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ITGSE.pdf>.

This publication outlines the essential components of effective sexuality education programmes, enables national authorities to design comprehensive curricula that will have a positive impact on young people's health and well-being and promotes structured learning about sex and relationships in a manner that is positive, affirming, and centered on the best interest of the young person.

Rutgers. *The Heart of the Matter: Embrace the Reality of Young People's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Today*. <https://rutgers.international/resources/the-heart-of-the-matter-embrace-the-reality-of-young-peoples-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights-today/>.

This #ICPD30 report gives a comprehensive insight into the reality of young people's SRHR and how well governments are implementing their commitments. It echoes the voices of young people from 16 countries and four regions and calls for change.

CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality.

The Flower of Participation. <https://www.choiceforyouth.org/assets/Toolkits/MIYP/Flower-of-Participation-Narrative/20171122-Flower-of-Participation-Narrative-2.pdf>.

The Flower of Participation toolkit explains the concept of Meaningful Youth Participation (MYP) and can be used by organisation and young people.

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). *ARROW for Change – Resisting Anti-Rights: Building Inclusive Movements, Enabling Feminist Agenda Setting Beyond 2030 in Asia and the Pacific*. <https://arrow.org.my/publication/arrow-for-change-resisting-anti-rights/>.

This publication examines the accelerating interconnected crises including climate change, intensifying inequities, shrinking civic space, and the rollback of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). It also further examines how such issues continue to disproportionately impact women and girls in all their diversities across the Asia-Pacific region.

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Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). *ARROW for Change – Reproductive Justice: Recalibrating the SRHR Agenda*. ARROW, 2024. <https://arrow.org.my/publication/arrow-for-change-reproductive-justice-recalibrating-the-srhr-agenda/>.

This publication builds upon the language of reproductive justice within the framework of development justice in the Global South, and grounds the concept of reproductive justice to ensure that health outcomes are fair and equitable to marginalised and vulnerable populations in the region.

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). *ARROW for Change: Disability Rights and SRHR*. <https://arrow.org.my/publication/arrow-for-change-disability-rights-and-srhr/>.

This publication addresses the integral need for more discourse on sexuality and SRHR for women and girls with disabilities across the Asia-Pacific region.

DEFINITIONS

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Casteism. Casteism refers to the discrimination or social prejudice based on caste, especially against members of lower castes, where individuals or groups are treated unequally, excluded, or oppressed on the basis of inherited caste status. It derives from rigid hierarchical caste systems that assign social rank and privilege, often resulting in unequal access to resources, opportunities, and rights.¹

Classism. Discrimination based on one's real or perceived economic status or background. It includes individual attitudes and systems that function to benefit the upper class at the expense of the lower classes.²

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.³

Crowdfunding. Crowdfunding is a fundraising method that collects relatively small amounts of capital from a large number of people, typically via online platforms, to finance a project, idea, business venture, or cause. This approach expands financial support beyond traditional funding sources by leveraging

community networks and digital technology.⁴

Gender-based violence. Gender-based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for harmful acts perpetrated against an individual or group because of their gender or gender identity, often rooted in power imbalances and gender inequality, and encompassing physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm whether in private or public spaces.⁵

Gender Justice. Gender justice is a concept that promotes the full realisation of rights and opportunities for all genders. It seeks to realise equality between men and women, as well as between diverse gender identities, in terms of rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. It is a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of gender discrimination and ensures that women and other gender minorities are not excluded from the full enjoyment of their human rights.⁶

Gender transformative. A gender-transformative approach refers to development projects, programmes, or policies that intentionally seek to challenge and change harmful gender norms, roles, and power relations in order to achieve substantive gender equality results. This goes beyond addressing symptoms of inequality to targeting underlying systemic and structural causes of gender-based discrimination and exclusion.⁷

Heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to the assumption that heterosexuality is the default, normal, or preferred sexual orientation, and that gender and sexual relationships should naturally align with a binary understanding of gender (male and female) within that framework. This concept also involves privileging heterosexual relationships and norms in social, cultural, and institutional contexts, often marginalising or excluding non-heterosexual identities and expressions.⁸

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Intergenerational Dialogues/ Intergenerational Mentorship.

Intergenerational dialogue refers to structured conversations or exchanges between people of different age groups that promote mutual learning, shared decision-making, and collaboration, often with equal participation and co-creation of knowledge and solutions across generations. This includes mentorship practices where older and younger individuals support each other's learning and leadership development in a reciprocal way.⁹

Internet generation. The internet generation broadly refers to people who have grown up with the Internet and digital technologies as an integral part of their lives, often understood as younger cohorts for whom the Internet has been readily available from an early age, shaping their communication, learning, and social behaviours.

Intersectionality. Intersectionality is a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power. It recognises that a person's life is shaped by multiple intersecting identities, relationships, and social factors, which together produce intersecting forms of privilege and oppression depending on context and systems of power such as patriarchy, ableism, colonialism, homophobia, and racism.

Marginalised Young People.

Marginalised Youth refers to young people who are excluded, disadvantaged, or discriminated against based on social, economic, cultural, political, or identity-based factors. This marginalisation can limit their access to essential resources such as education, employment, healthcare, housing, and community participation.

Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Engagement/Participation (MIYP).

Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Participation (MIYP) means that all young people can participate on equal terms with adults, or work independently,

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in organisations and in all stages of programming and policy-making: design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. If participation of young people is truly meaningful, it has to be inclusive of all young people.

Multilateralism. Multilateralism is a coordination of national policies in groups of three or more states on the basis of certain principles of ordering relations among these states.

Reproductive Health. Reproductive Health implies that people are able to have a responsible, satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. Implicit in this are the right of men and women to be informed of and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of fertility regulation of their choice, and to appropriate health care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant.

Reproductive Rights. Reproductive rights embrace certain human rights that are already recognised in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus documents. These rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes their right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, as expressed in human rights documents.

Sexual Health. Sexual health implies a positive approach to human sexuality and the purpose of sexual health care should be the enhancement of life and personal relations as well as counselling and care

related to reproduction and sexually transmitted diseases.

Sexuality. Sexuality is a central aspect of being human that includes sex, gender identities, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction. It is expressed through thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, values, behaviors, and relationships. While sexuality may involve these elements, not all are always present. It is shaped by biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious, and spiritual factors.

Sexual Rights. Sexual rights embrace human rights that are already recognised in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus documents. These include the right of all persons, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, to the highest attainable standard of health in relation to sexuality, including access to sexual and reproductive health care services; seek, receive and impart information in relation to sexuality; sexuality education; respect for bodily integrity; choice of partner; decide to be sexually active or not; consensual sexual relations; consensual marriage; decide whether or not, and when to have children; and pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life.

Systemic Oppression. Systemic oppression is the mistreatment of a social, ethnic or racial group, perpetuated by governments, schools, healthcare systems and other socioeconomic structures. Oppression that occurs at the institutional level contributes to power imbalances and discrimination. This results in severe disadvantages for specific groups.

Tokenism. Tokenism refers to the practice of including individuals from under-represented or marginalised groups in a superficial or symbolic way often to create the appearance of inclusion without granting them meaningful participation, influence, or power. It is frequently

critiqued as a form of performative diversity that fails to address structural inequities.

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MILESTONES OF CHANGE: *Advancing CSE through RHRN2*

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Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is a fundamental component of young people’s rights to information, health, education, equality, and non-discrimination, and is a human rights imperative. It contributes not only to improved sexual and reproductive health outcomes, but also to gender equality, bodily autonomy, and empowerment.^{1, 2}

The normative foundation of CSE is firmly embedded in international human rights law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) affirms the rights to education, health, and information.³ The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) obliges states to ensure children’s access to information and education that promotes health and well-being, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). This obligation is grounded in Article 17 (access to information), Article 24 (right to health), Article 28 (right to education), and Article 29 (aims of education).⁴ These commitments have been further clarified by the Committee on the Rights of the Child through General Comment No. 4 (2003) on adolescent health and development and General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the rights of the child during adolescence,

both of which affirm states’ responsibilities to provide CSE and ensure adolescents’ access to accurate SRHR information.^{5, 6}

Similarly, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) obliges state parties to eliminate discrimination in education and ensure access to appropriate health care services, including family planning information and services.⁷ The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women further clarified this in General Recommendation No. 24 on Women and Health, emphasising that access to education and information is integral to the realisation of women’s health and reproductive rights.⁸

Despite these global commitments, CSE remains a contested policy space across much of Asia, often caught between progressive commitments and conservative pushback.

At the global policy level, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action (1994) explicitly recognised sexuality education as essential for achieving reproductive rights.⁹ The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) reinforced this by urging governments to develop curricula on human sexuality and reproductive health.¹⁰ More recently, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development embeds CSE under SDG 3 (Health) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), while intersecting with SDG 4 (Quality Education). UNESCO’s International Guidance on Sexuality Education provides evidence-based standards and is globally recognised as a benchmark for CSE policy and practice.²

Despite these global commitments, CSE remains a contested policy space across much of Asia, often caught between progressive commitments and conservative pushback. Implementation remains uneven, constrained by socio-cultural resistance, limited political will, and underfunded health and education systems.

Within this context, youth-led coalitions in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Nepal have localised international commitments into concrete advocacy, influencing laws, policies, and social norms around CSE and broader SRHR. The Right Here Right Now 2 (RHRN2) programme offers a case study of how, between 2021 and 2025, coalitions in these three countries demonstrated that youth-led, multi-stakeholder advocacy can shift policy, secure resources, and institutionalise CSE across diverse political and socio-cultural contexts.

Rights-based Policy and Legal Shifts.

Human rights frameworks provided strong leverage for policy alignment in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Indonesia. Across the three countries, RHRN coalitions strategically engaged government authorities through constitutional guarantees, treaty obligations, and global human rights review mechanisms to position CSE as a state responsibility. This resulted in key legal and policy shifts that enabled more supportive environments for CSE.^{4, 7}

In 2021, Nepal accepted Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendations on CSE and safe abortion, reaffirming state obligations rooted in constitutional guarantees and human rights. A landmark Supreme Court order in 2023 on marriage equality further shifted the national discourse on rights.³

In Indonesia, national legislation such as the Sexual Violence Crime Law (UU TPKS) and the New Penal Code strengthened legal protections against sexual violence and enabled CSE implementation in schools. Complementary regulations by the Ministries of Education and Religious Affairs reinforced accountability in formal and faith-based educational institutions, creating stronger legal anchors for school-based CSE.⁷

The Right Here Right Now 2 (RHRN2) programme offers a case study of how, between 2021 and 2025, coalitions in these three countries demonstrated that youth-led, multi-stakeholder advocacy can shift policy, secure resources, and institutionalise CSE across diverse political and socio-cultural contexts.

Bangladesh advanced rights-based frameworks through engagement with political parties, the National Human Rights Commission, and international platforms. Legal recognition initiatives supported transgender burial rights and the rights of children of sex workers. Additionally, youth-led monitoring of health facilities was institutionalised through approval from the Directorate General of Family Planning (DGFP), strengthening state accountability in SRHR service delivery.^{8, 9}

Localisation and Governance Reform.

Across all three countries, local authorities—including municipalities, districts, and villages—proved receptive to rights-based CSE advocacy.

In Nepal, local governments adopted CSE plans and allocated budgets for implementation. In 2022, the Government of Nepal allocated a dedicated budget for LGBTIQ+ awareness and stigma reduction through local governments, marking only the second such allocation in 13 years. Building on this momentum, in 2025, Chhayanaath Rara Municipality allocated NPR 350,000 for programmes addressing child marriage prevention, SRHR, and climate change.^{5, 6}

In Indonesia, strategic memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with district governments, village authorities,

universities, and local service providers facilitated the integration of SRHR into local systems. In Indramayu, community-based service centres (PLKs) were formally enabled to provide SRHR education and case assistance. In Langkat, partnerships supported the establishment of an Integrated Unit for Women and Child Protection (PYTD PPA). Engagement with local education offices and universities institutionalised SRHR content within district- and campus-level agendas, promoting decentralised ownership, resource allocation, and sustainability.⁷

In Bangladesh, district education officers enforced CSE delivery in over 2,000 schools, and the Whole School Approach was piloted nationally in 66 schools across 22 districts in collaboration with the Department of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE). Young people joined 55 health committees in 2023, improving accountability. Participatory tools such as community scorecards, developed with the DGFP, are widely used to monitor service quality and strengthen local oversight. Partnerships with government bodies, including the Department of Youth Development, supported livelihood initiatives, skills development, and resource allocation for marginalised populations, creating locally owned solutions for sustainable SRHR outcomes.^{8, 9}

Localisation provided tangible entry points for implementation, budgeting, and community engagement, while making CSE more context-specific and relevant.

Institutionalisation Through Education Systems.

Institutionalisation ensured that CSE was not dependent on individual champions or short-term projects, but embedded within education systems and professional norms—one of RHRN's key achievements.²

In Indonesia, an interministerial agreement between the Ministries of Education and Health strengthened teacher competencies on adolescent reproductive health. Co-created CSE modules, implementation guidelines, master teacher training, and on-the-job learning provided standardised tools for school-based delivery. By 2024, CSE was mandated as a core undergraduate course and offered as an elective at postgraduate level at the Indonesian Education University (UPI). At district level, Indramayu scaled up CSE to 216 junior high schools under a formal education office decree. In 2025, the establishment of a CSE Special Needs Study Centre at UPI, along with commitments from six other universities, further embedded CSE into pre-service and in-service teacher education.²

In Nepal, the first National Conference on CSE resulted in a government declaration prioritising multi-stakeholder coordination among ministries, local governments, schools, youth networks, and civil society organisations. Godawari Municipality integrated CSE into local curricula for grades four to eight, reaching nearly 100 schools. The National Health Training Center integrated disability-friendly services into its Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health training manual, ensuring inclusive care by health professionals.^{4, 5}

In Bangladesh, CSE and life-skills lessons are now implemented in over 2,000 schools and madrasas. The revival of adolescent-friendly health corners in government facilities and mandated school-level CSE enforcement expanded access across education and health systems. The Whole School Approach also institutionalised master trainer development and teacher training, while parallel capacity-building initiatives for frontline health workers strengthened school-community linkages and adolescent-friendly service delivery.^{2, 8}

Inclusion, Intersectionality, and Community Engagement. By explicitly addressing disability rights, climate resilience, sexual and gender diversity, and community-specific needs, RHRN coalitions advanced CSE as an intersectional issue.^{5, 6, 8}

In Indonesia, multi-stakeholder platforms such as Aliansi Inklusif Jombang and Cikal Academia brought together civil society, local government, and community actors to address SRHR and sexual and gender-based violence. Community-based services, including PLKs and youth-friendly integrated services, expanded access to information, referrals, and survivor support. Trans women community chapters established in six districts of North Sumatra enhanced social inclusion and rights protection. Engagement with schools, village governments, parents, and service providers reinforced shared accountability for adolescent and community SRHR outcomes.⁷

In Nepal, inclusive SRHR approaches prioritised marginalised and underserved groups. Disability-friendly SRHR manuals and booklets were developed and distributed, and the inclusion of an LGBTQ+ chapter in curricula advanced inclusivity. These efforts ensured equitable access to information and reinforced the principle that SRHR is for all.^{4, 5}

In Bangladesh, the coalition developed CSE materials in Braille and sign language, in both text and video formats, for people with disabilities. Livelihood training and start-up support were provided for hijra and transgender communities, and land was secured for them in Mymensingh district. Environmental and climate-linked initiatives engaged schools and communities in addressing child marriage and climate-induced health vulnerabilities.^{8, 9}

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This intersectional approach deepened public and institutional buy-in, underscoring CSE's importance for dignity, safety, and equity, particularly for marginalised groups.

Digital Innovation and Youth-led Accountability. Digital platforms created new avenues for CSE access and accountability. While technology extended reach, youth-led mechanisms institutionalised young people as monitoring partners.²

In Indonesia, the government developed CSE modules (SETARA), expanding teacher and student access. In 2025, a Learning Management System (LMS) for SETARA was launched with plans for national rollout, marking a shift toward scalable digital learning.²

In Nepal, digital platforms enhanced access to SRHR information and accountability. In 2022, Know Your Body, an interactive digital platform featuring articles, blogs, and quizzes, expanded access to youth-friendly information. E-learning modules on gender and sexuality—covering SOGIESC, gender equity, SRHR, and mental health—offered self-paced, inclusive learning tools for both youth and adults, supporting data-driven accountability.^{5, 6}

In Bangladesh, RHRN's online platforms reached thousands nationwide, with over 35,000 followers on Facebook and 28,000 on TikTok disseminating SRHR and CSE content. Collaborations with prominent influencers generated millions of views. Youth-led monitoring of 41 health facilities generated data that contributed to improved service quality and responsiveness.^{8, 9}

Institutionalising CSE equips young people with the knowledge, skills, and agency to exercise their rights, promote gender equality, and contribute to sustainable development.

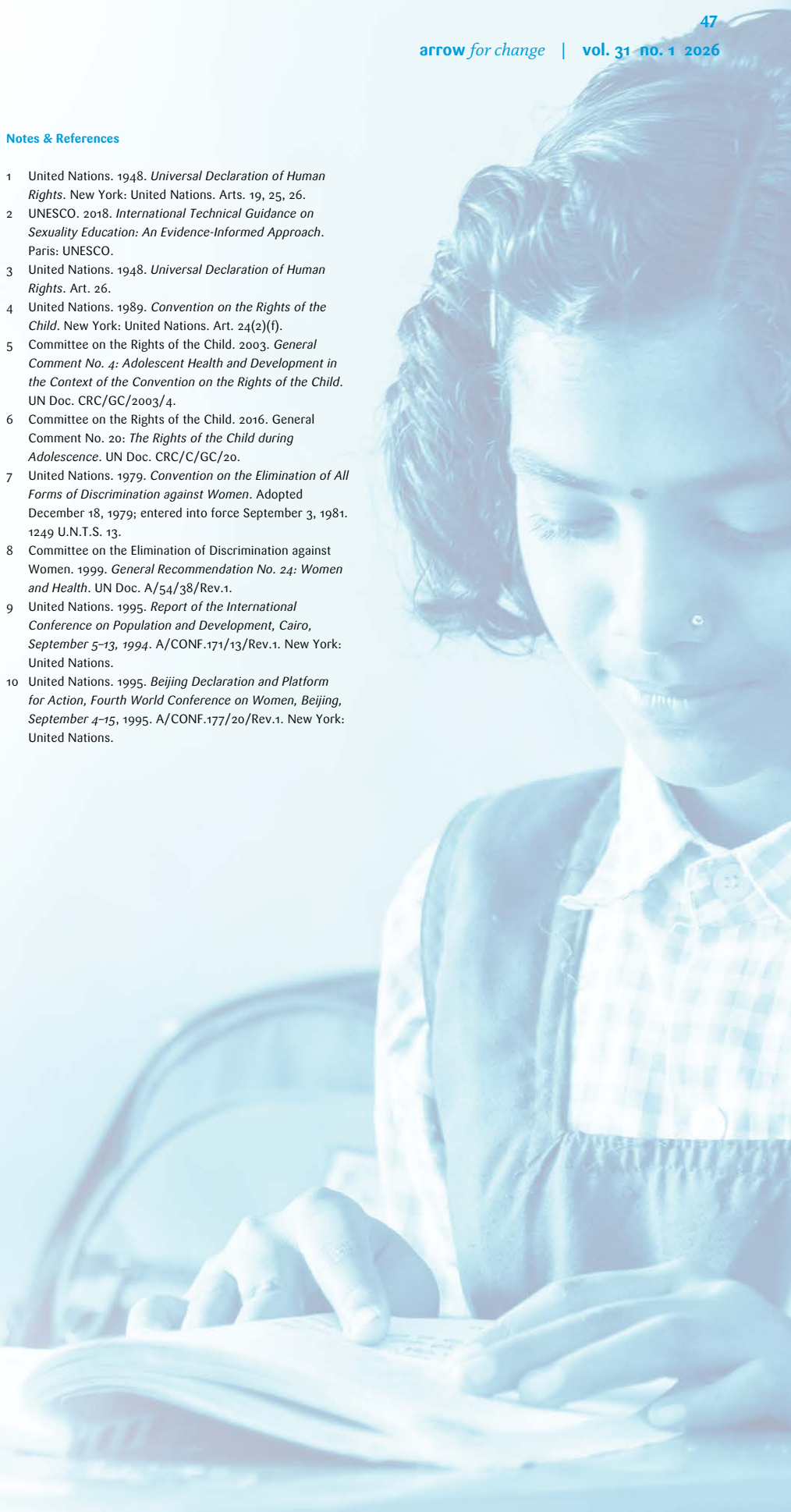
Taken together, these experiences reaffirm that CSE is most effective when grounded in human rights principles, anchored in local governance, strengthened through institutional partnerships, and meaningfully engaging young people.

Conclusion. CSE is not merely a pedagogical tool but a human rights obligation, grounded in international commitments and standards.^{1, 2} The experiences of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Indonesia demonstrate that sustained, youth-led, and multi-stakeholder advocacy is essential to overcoming socio-cultural and political barriers.^{4, 7} Institutionalising CSE equips young people with the knowledge, skills, and agency to exercise their rights, promote gender equality, and contribute to sustainable development.²

Taken together, these experiences reaffirm that CSE is most effective when grounded in human rights principles, anchored in local governance, strengthened through institutional partnerships, and meaningfully engaging young people. As Asian states grapple with demographic change, inequality, and shrinking civic space, lessons from RHRN underscore that investing in comprehensive, inclusive, and institutionalised CSE is essential not only for advancing SRHR, but also for achieving gender equality, social justice, and sustainable development.^{1, 2, 9}

Notes & References

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