Rutgers
For sexual and reproductive health and rights

A nation of young leaders: how youth participation is affecting change in Senegal

Gender equality as a catalyst for lasting change

Power to You(th) Senegal

In Senegal, half population is under 25 and 28% are aged between 25 and 35. Despite this, many young people face serious challenges which limit their opportunities. This is especially true for girls who are less likely to go to secondary school, often due to gender-based violence, discrimination, early marriage or pregnancy. Although the legal age of marriage is 16 for girls and 18 for boys, 31% of girls are married before they turn 18, and 9% marrying even earlier.

Despite the clear need, access to essential life-skills education and reproductive health services remains limited, particularly for adolescent girls.

In April 2024, 44-year-old Bassirou Diomaye Faye was elected president of Senegal, making him the youngest democratically elected leader in Africa.

There's a feeling that President Faye's young age will help him connect with and inspire young people and encourage them to get more involved in governance and politics, paving the way for a new generation of leaders in Senegal – and Africa, more broadly – to emerge.

The Power to You(th) programme has harnessed this momentum and is increasing young people's participation in political life and in key decision-making arenas, particularly young women's involvement. Even in the country's most traditional areas, the programme has led to greater acceptance of young people's right to participate in civic life, and the unique contribution they can make to their communities, regions and country.

Power to You(th) supports adolescent girls and young women, especially those from remote or marginalised communities, to speak up on the issues affecting them, make informed choices and take control of their futures. The programme promotes gender equality by helping young people to understand their rights and challenge harmful traditions and barriers that limit their opportunities.

Issues like child marriage, female genital mutilation, sexual and gender-based violence, and unintended pregnancy continue to affect millions of young people around the world. Power to You(th) works to prevent these practices by addressing the gender expectations behind them and enabling girls and young women to be meaningfully included in making the decisions that shape their lives.

POWER TO YOUTH
CHANGE STARTS WITH YOU(TH)

How are more young people getting involved in civic life in Senegal?

Power to You(th) Senegal has encouraged more young people to take part in political life in their neighbourhoods and districts, and it has supported young people with the drive for change to get elected to government positions at regional and national level.

Its pioneering Ci Laa Bokk initiative, dedicated to advancing meaningful and inclusive youth participation (MIYP) in decision-making and leadership, has enabled diverse young people to strengthen the skills they need to claim their civic rights and have influence indecision-making spaces.

Leadership training and confidence-strengthening sessions for young members of civil society organisations provided through the programme means young people's voices are now being heard in discussions on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) strategies and policies and young people are present in the places where decisions are taken on how to address harmful practices, including female genital mutilation/ cutting, child marriage, unintended pregnancies and sexual and gender-based violence.

Yacine Sall, Project Manager for Amref Africa, a member of the Power to You(th) consortium in Senegal, said: "In Senegal, we don't have youth-oriented policies, and it's very important for us to ensure that young people can participate in decision-making forums.

We're trying to ensure that, by 2025, one young protégé will be involved in decision-making. We have set targets to ensure that young people are involved at all levels.

Matam regional fair, attended by various local and administrative authorities.

Mariéme Soda Ndiaye, a member of the Cii laa Bokk platform.

We have seen young people take part in local elections and be elected at local and parliamentary level. Power to Youth has raised young people's awareness of the importance of participation. We fight for this almost every day. We have to make sure that young people's priorities are taken into account. This has never been the case before. And we hope that now that we have the youngest president in our history, it will happen."

Power to You(th) is also strengthening young people's ability to understand the law and their own rights. Regional platforms have been set up to enable young people to express their opinions on important legal and policy decisions.

Papa Makha Nguer Seck, gender focal point for Power to You(th) partner ARPV in the Thiès region, adds: "We want to make sure that the authorities listen to what young people are saying, and that they are better represented at different levels.

"We have noticed that young people are now invited to take part in important meetings, such as budget meetings, and that they work in collaboration with the authorities and other stakeholders, helping to influence the decisions taken."

Supporting young people to win government positions to drive change

Several graduates of the Ci Laa Bokk programme have been appointed to key positions in the new government where they can exert genuine power and influence over the decisions that affect young people's lives, bodies and futures.

ARPV's Papa Makha explains: "We try to identify young emerging leaders, build their capacity and give them guidance with regard to youth participation."

Souleymane Ndiaye, prefect of the Matam department in northeastern Senegal, praised the Power to You(th) programme, in particular for the way it is enabling young people to take part in decision-making bodies and the visibility it has given to advocacy issues such as effective care of adolescent girls, reproductive health and gender-based violence: "It's a programme we've known and followed for three years. Its actions converge with our interests within the Comité départemental pour la protection de l'enfance (CDPE). We're going to ensure that all these activities are capitalised on by the CDPE, which is a departmental body. We'll act together, and the support will be natural and fluid."

> "We make sure that, in all activities, if there are two people supposed to participate, one is a man and the other a woman. Women are not left out."
>
> Yacine Sall, Project Manager for Amref Africa in Senegal

How are young women claiming their space at the table?

As in most countries, young women in Senegal experience greater barriers than young men when it comes to participating in politics, leadership and decision-making. Power to You(th) is helping young women to overcome some of these obstacles by taking a gender-transformative approach (GTA), which – among others things – seeks to ensure genders are equally represented in programmes and activities.

> "Women and men work together to achieve our goals. We have platforms that involve women and people with disabilities. Everyone has their place around the table to express their opinion."
>
> Yacine Sall, Project Manager for Amref Africa in Senegal

About Rutgers' gender-transformative approach

Gender-transformative approaches aim to address root causes of gender inequality and power imbalances by challenging harmful, rigid and unequal social norms. They work to replace these with more inclusive and respectful ones, leading to better SRHR outcomes and helping to prevent violence and discrimination.

Rutgers' GTA key strategies include promoting and protecting human rights, encouraging people to critically reflect on traditional gender roles and expectations, highlighting the negative impacts of harmful norms on SRHR and the benefits of change, supporting the empowerment of women and girls, including those often excluded or disadvantaged, and involving boys and men in efforts to improve SRHR and promote equality for all members of society.

A committed network of focal points in each target area shares knowledge and learning about GTA and encourages the approach to be used in community activities.

The Power to You(th) programme counts more young women than men among its gender focal points. These young women have developed their leadership skills and are a positive influence on other girls in their community. Many now hold positions of responsibility and actively defend women's rights in key decision-making spaces, both locally and nationally. One such young woman is Rockhy Sylla, a socio-educational animator, who was appointed focal point for child protection in the Departmental Centre for Popular Education and Sports (CDEPS) in the Department of Foundiougne after acting as an assistant to a Power to You(th) focal point.
The training courses she did through Power to You(th) gave her a wealth of learning and experience, which she has used to conduct several awareness-raising and advocacy activities on child protection.

CDEPS and other departmental centres focus on popular and sports education and host teen advice centres for young people, which provide support and information on sexual and reproductive health.

> "The training I received as part of the (Power to You(th)) project and the activities I carried out gave me a foothold in the community and the confidence of authorities such as the director of the CDEPS in the Department of Foundiougne, who recommended me to the foundationy."
>
> Rockhy Sylla, socio-educational animator

Young women's role in promoting gender equality

Even in very conservative areas of Senegal where Power to You(th) operates, attitudes have been changing on gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and youth participation. Civil society organisations and gender focal points have helped to bring about these changes, supported by virtual capacity-strengthening workshops on GTA. The programme has also created girls' clubs which build confidence and leadership skills among young women and discuss issues such as early pregnancy and marriage, gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and menstrual hygiene.

Power to You(th) organised a poetry slam and graffiti competition to enable young girls to express themselves and creatively raise awareness of the need to reduce harmful practices, and the contribution young women can make to affecting change. Working with influential local figures to raise community awareness of young people's rights and harmful practices, the programme has played a crucial role in encouraging others to become actively involved in advocacy and social change.

Rochky Sylla, focal point for child protection in the department of Foundiougne.

> The Power to You(th) programme has contributed to strengthening my leadership. As a woman in charge of a structure made up mainly of girls, I have been able to train and inspire young people to advocate for the integration of young people into decision-making bodies. I am determined and committed to continuing the fight for the autonomy and dignity of all women and girls.
>
> Fatima Mamadou Lamine SY,
> deputy mayor of the town of Guédiawaye

Working with young female parliamentarians

Power to You(th) also works with young women who sit in the National Assembly and are influential in shaping public policy. One of these women is Senegal's youngest member of parliament, Marième Soda, Executive Director of the Commissariat à la Sécurité Alimentaire et à la Résilience.

A total of 138 young people have been trained in sexual and reproductive health and have taken the lessons learned back to their communities.

Through the programme, young female parliamentarians have strengthened their advocacy and legislative skills. As Power to You(th) ambassadors, these impressive young women are making issues relating to women's rights, harmful practices and gender-based violence more visible in the country's main seat of power. At the National Assembly, they have advocated to strengthen laws to end female genital mutilation and for legislation on female genital mutilation to be harmonized between neighbouring states.

The young women inspiring other young females to take action

Fatima Mamadou Lamine SY is the recently elected deputy mayor of the town of Guédiawaye, the General Secretary of the Senegalese Association for the Future of Women and Children and a Power to You(th) focal point. She works closely with the media to advocate for young people to be included in decision-making bodies and is getting results.

Fatima comes from a Halpulaar community in the Podor region, which is fundamentally conservative in its values. In this region, certain harmful traditions, such as female genital mutilation and early marriage, persist.

"These traditions shaped my youth and sowed the seeds of my future resistance," says Fatima. "My commitment to defending the rights of women and children has brought about positive change, but at the cost of a heavy personal price, ranging from stigmatisation to outright rejection, which means I often feel isolated within my own community."

With the support of the members of her association and her family, Fatima advocates that young people, and in particular young girls, drive change on the issues that concern them. ■

> The programme has had a significant impact on the empowerment of young people, particularly young women, in Senegal. The innovative initiatives and collaborative approach have led to positive changes in communities and strengthened the voice and leadership of young people. We're really working on women's leadership and girls' empowerment. Power to You(th) spares no effort to achieve this.
>
> Papa Makha Nguer Seck, ARPV's

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Power to You(th) is a five-year programme (2021–25) funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The programme is implemented in partnership with Rutgers, Sonke Gender Justice and Amref Health Africa, together with with technical partners KIT Royal Tropical Institute and Choice for Youth & Sexuality and country management teams in Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Ethiopia, Senegal, Ghana and Indonesia.

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