A nation of young leaders

Rutgers

Power to You(th) Senegal

The power of young people is a recurring theme in Senegal. Half of the population is under 25, and 28% are between the ages of 25 and 35.

In April 2024, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, 44, was elected president of the West African nation, making him Africa's youngest democratically elected leader.

There is a sense that President Faye's young age will help him connect with young Senegalese, inspire them with new hopes and perspectives, engage them more in governance and politics, and pave the way for a new generation of leaders in the country and, more broadly, in Africa as a whole.

The Power to You(th) programmein Senegal has harnessed this momentum and is increasing young people's participation in key decision-making spaces, particularly young women. Even in the most traditional areas, it is helping communities more easily accept greater youth participation.

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

Power to You(th) Senegal has encouraged more young people to engage in politics at district, regional and national levels. Its Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Participation approach helps young people understand their civil rights and join decision-making bodies.

Through the programme, young members of civil society organisations take part in leadership and confidence-building sessions. These sessions prepare them to contribute to strategies and policies on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Many now participate in forums where decisions on harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation, child marriage, gender-based violence and unintended pregnancies, are taken.

Yacine Sall, project Power to You(th) manager for Amref Africa, says: "In Senegal, we don't have youth-centred policies and it is very important for us to ensure that young people can participate in decision-making spaces.

We are trying to ensure that by 2025, a young protégé is involved in decision-making spheres. We have set targets to ensure youth participation at all levels. It's something we fight for almost every day. We need to ensure that the priorities of young people 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."

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 participate in important meetings, such as budget meetings, and that they are working collaboratively with the authorities and other stakeholders, helping to influence the decisions taken."

Power to You(th) has also strengthened young people's ability to understand the laws, enabling them to campaign for their rights. Platforms have been set up at regional level to allow young people to express their opinion on important decisions.

Working with young female parliamentarians

The programme also supports young women parliamentarians to strengthen their advocacy and legislative skills. These women sit in the National Assembly and play an important role in the development of public policies. 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.

> "I decided, with the support of the members of my association and my family, to advocate... to allow young people, and especially young girls, to take their responsibilities on issues that concern them."
>
> Fatima Mamadou Lamine SY,
> deputy mayor of the city of Guédiawaye

As ambassadors for the project, these young women actively advocate on issues related to women's rights, harmful practices and sexual- and gender-based violence. At the National Assembly, they are advocating to strengthen laws relating to female genital mutilation and for legislation on female genital mutilation to be harmonized between neighbouring states.

Campaigning for the autonomy and dignity of all women and girls

Fatima Mamadou Lamine SY is the recently elected deputy mayor of the city of Guédiawaye. As Power to You(th) focal point and Secretary General of the Senegalese Association for the Future of Women and Children (ASAFE), she works closely with the media to advocate for young people to be included in decision-making bodies, both within communities and nationally.

Fatima is an activist for the rights of women and children. She says: "Concerned about the future of this vulnerable group, I have often come up against several difficulties ranging from stigmatization to total rejection by my community.

> "The Power to You(th) programme has effectively contributed to the strengthening of my leadership. Indeed, as a woman and a leader of a structure composed mainly of girls, I was able to train and inspire young people to advocate for the integration of young people into decision-making bodies."
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> deputy mayor of the city of Guédiawaye

Originally from the Podor region and from a Halpulaar community, which is fundamentally conservative and of traditional values, I had to fight night and day while transforming my anger and disappointment into a strength to make my peers aware harmful practices. Living in Guédiawaye, a suburb of Dakar, I come from a place where some harmful traditions, such as excision [female genital mutilation] and early marriage, unfortunately persist. These traditions shaped my youth and sowed the seeds of my future resistance. My commitment has brought positive change but at a high personal cost, often making me feel isolated within my own community."

I am determined and committed to carry the fight for the autonomy and dignity of all women and girls."