

Youth Engagement in Gender Justice and Resilience: Voices from India

Author: Samiksha Jha, Martha Farrell Foundation, India

Introduction

Youth participation in India encounters multiple challenges, largely due to the country's diverse socio-economic, cultural, and regional realities. The experiences and aspirations of young people differ significantly across urban and rural contexts, income levels, and access to education, ethnicity, religion and gender. Consequently, their concerns and priorities are not uniform. Moreover, the platforms available for youth engagement are often neither democratic nor genuinely participatory, resulting in the exclusion of those without prior exposure, social capital, or institutional connections. Participation, therefore, tends to be limited to a relatively privileged section of young people (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007).

In the field of education, youth engagement continues to be narrowly defined. In both schools and higher education institutions, participation is largely equated with attendance, classroom performance, and examination results. The broader dimensions of education — such as questioning established norms, expressing dissent, understanding one's rights, and speaking out against their violation — are often discouraged or even viewed as acts of defiance (Singh & Rai, 2025). When educational environments are not conducive to open dialogue, large sections of students remain deprived of their right to meaningful education and critical thinking which in future impacts their future involvement in participation or other engagement processes.

For instance, India has legal frameworks designed to promote safety and inclusion in educational settings. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 mandates that every school form a Child Protection Committee responsible for ensuring a safe environment and addressing complaints of abuse. However, implementation remains deeply inadequate. According to a [study](#) conducted by the Martha Farrell Foundation, only 199 schools in Delhi constituted a Child Protection Committee and provided details of the committee out of 1379 government schools and the situation in other states is likely far worse, where discussions on safety and protection are often absent altogether. When basic safety cannot be assured, equal participation becomes nearly impossible.

Similarly, at the higher education level, the University Grants Commission (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of Women Employees and Students in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2015 sought to ensure that every college and university establish an Internal Committee and conduct regular sensitisation programmes on gender and sexual harassment. This lack of safety and accountability within campuses discourages students,

particularly women and marginalised genders, from participating fully in academic, social, or political spaces.

According to official reports, as of 2023, India has 1,113 universities and 43,796 colleges. Yet, between April 2022 and March 2023, the University Grants Commission (UGC) received information from only 238 universities and 372 colleges regarding the formation of Internal Committees and organisation of sensitisation training. This situation points to a serious policy-level concern. Although laws and guidelines have existed for over a decade, their implementation remains weak, and awareness among both students and educators is minimal. When safety and equality are not institutional priorities, participation becomes linear, exclusionary, and undemocratic, leaving little space for questioning or collective dialogue.

Economic participation reflects similar patterns of exclusion. Youth engagement in the workforce is deeply divided along regional, caste, class, and especially gender lines. Female youth participation remains significantly lower, rooted in disparities that begin at the level of school enrolment and educational attainment. Recognising the link between workplace safety and women's economic participation, India introduced the Vishakha Guidelines in 1997 and later enacted the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. This legislation extended protections to women across formal and informal sectors, aiming to make workplaces safer and thereby encourage women's participation in the labour force. Yet, implementation continues to be weak, and many women hesitate to report harassment due to stigma and fear of being labelled as troublemakers or false complainants (V. N. & Rao, 2024).

These systemic barriers contribute to a persistent gender gap in workforce participation, particularly among young women. The lack of safety, inadequate policy enforcement, and absence of institutional support restrict women's social mobility and limit their access to public spaces. According to the International Labour Organization, nearly 89% of Indian youth remain unemployed or underemployed, reflecting severe structural constraints on economic and civic participation (ILO, 2024).

This, in turn, affects political and civic engagement. When young people, especially from marginalised and gender-diverse communities, are unable to express themselves freely in schools, universities, or workplaces, their broader participation in democratic and decision-making processes also remains constrained. Analyses of NSSO data reveal that unemployment and poor-quality employment among youth are particularly acute among those from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and religious minorities, underscoring how intersecting structural inequities restrict both economic and social mobility (Mamgain & Tiwari, 2016). The *World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement* (UNDESA, 2016) similarly observes that economic marginalisation and job insecurity undermine young people's capacity and motivation to participate in civic and political life, as economic vulnerability often translates into

limited voice and agency in public affairs. The *Youth in India: Situation and Needs* study by the International Institute for Population Sciences and the Population Council (2010) further shows that young women and those from marginalised backgrounds have fewer opportunities to participate in civil society or political processes, largely because of restrictive gender norms, educational inequalities, and institutional exclusion. Together, these findings suggest that when educational and workplace spaces fail to nurture agency and self-expression, particularly for gender-diverse and socially disadvantaged youth, the consequences extend far beyond individual livelihoods, weakening democratic participation and reinforcing cycles of exclusion from decision-making processes.

In this sense, youth participation in India is fragmented, polarised, and often dominated by those with privilege. The voices of young women, LGBTQ+ youth, and those from structurally marginalised backgrounds remain underrepresented. Increasingly, young people are coming to the forefront to speak about non-binary identities, gender fluidity, and sexual orientation, challenging entrenched social norms and demanding recognition, respect, and rights. These issues matter to youth today because they are directly linked to their sense of identity, inclusion, and safety in educational, social, and digital spaces. Youth engagement must therefore be understood as a multi-dimensional concept encompassing social, economic, political, and digital participation. Even where political engagement exists, it often takes the form of representation or support for others rather than genuine participation in decision-making and leadership.

However, programs such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP), the National Programme for Youth and Adolescent Development (NPYAD), and the National Service Scheme (NSS) have demonstrated significant potential in promoting youth participation, gender equality, and civic engagement in India. BBBP has contributed to improving awareness around girls' education and gender equity, reaching thousands of schools and districts, and providing a platform for young people to advocate for community-level change. NPYAD equips adolescents with leadership skills, life skills, and knowledge about social issues, enabling them to take part in decision-making processes and civic initiatives at local and regional levels. The NSS, with its millions of student volunteers across higher education institutions, facilitates hands-on participation in community development, from gender sensitisation and health awareness to environmental action. These programs offer structured avenues for youth to develop critical thinking, leadership, and collaborative skills, demonstrating the government's recognition of youth as agents of change. Yet, despite their potential, the effectiveness of these initiatives often varies across regions due to gaps in implementation, limited awareness, and socio-cultural barriers, leaving many marginalised youth unable to fully access the benefits or translate them into sustained civic engagement.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to examine the critical role of youth participation in shaping social, economic, and political life in India. It seeks to explore the structural, cultural, and institutional

challenges that constrain young people's engagement, particularly for marginalised and gender-diverse communities. The paper also highlights how marginalized youth are increasingly questioning norms, asserting their rights, and driving change in discourses around gender equality. By analysing these dynamics, the study aims to provide insights into the conditions necessary for more inclusive and meaningful youth participation. Ultimately, it underscores the transformative potential of young people in promoting gender justice and resilience in Indian society.

Why Youth Participation Matters

India's youth population represents one of the largest cohorts globally, cutting across class, caste, gender, and regional lines, and embodies both immense potential and persistent structural inequities. Within this landscape, young people from low- and middle-income families often remain at the periphery of mainstream policy and decision-making, their voices muted by systemic barriers. Yet, it is precisely these youth who are actively shaping grassroots narratives of justice and resilience, challenging entrenched hierarchies, and redefining what meaningful participation looks like.

Participation matters not merely as a demographic imperative but as a source of insight and innovation. Youth engagement brings contextually grounded knowledge, lived experiences, and diverse perspectives that are essential for designing policies and interventions that are inclusive, responsive, and equitable. These young actors are expanding the boundaries of gender justice, moving beyond a singular focus on women's rights to embrace LGBTQI+ rights, intersectional equity, and climate justice, thereby reframing traditional understandings of social justice.

Civil society organisations and community-led movements play a critical role in amplifying these voices. By providing safe spaces, mentorship, and platforms for dialogue, CSOs help young people navigate institutional and societal barriers, build capacity, and engage in advocacy. Community initiatives, often rooted in local realities, empower youth to participate in decision-making processes, develop leadership skills, and contribute to social change from the ground up. These partnerships between youth and civil society not only enhance participation but also strengthen the legitimacy and reach of grassroots efforts towards gender justice and social equity.

In essence, youth participation is both transformative and generative: it challenges exclusionary norms, cultivates agency among marginalised groups, and enriches public discourse with ideas informed by lived realities.

Current Gaps and Challenges in Youth Participation

Despite growing recognition of youth as agents of change, meaningful participation in India remains highly uneven and constrained by structural, social, and institutional barriers. Youth voices are often tokenised in committees, panels, or consultative forums, where their opinions are acknowledged symbolically but rarely acted upon. For many, participation becomes

performative, benefiting only those with prior exposure, social networks, or economic privilege, while marginalised youth remain largely unheard.

Patriarchal and hierarchical attitudes persist even within youth collectives, limiting inclusivity. Leadership roles are often dominated by male peers, and young women or gender-diverse youth face subtle pressures to remain silent. In many communities, expressing one's true identity whether related to gender, sexual orientation, or non-binary identity is still considered unacceptable, and young people who do so risk social stigma, exclusion, or reprisal. These internalised biases and societal pressures restrict the ability of youth to question authority, express dissent, or challenge entrenched hierarchies. As a result, participation becomes constrained, not only limiting individual agency but also reducing the collective capacity of youth spaces to represent diverse perspectives. Such patterns replicate broader societal inequities within supposedly progressive environments, reinforcing exclusion rather than fostering the meaningful inclusion necessary for equitable leadership and decision-making.

Institutional gaps further compound these challenges. Many schools and universities either lack functional committees for safety or operate them perfunctorily, undermining the safety and agency of students, particularly girls and gender-diverse youth. In workplaces and civic spaces, policies such as the PoSH Act or decentralised governance mechanisms often exist in theory but are weakly implemented, limiting both access and practical utility.

Political participation among youth is particularly constrained. Despite India's decentralised governance framework — including Panchayats and Municipalities empowered under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. Youth engagement at the village and municipal levels remains minimal. According to PRIA (2007), although youth constitute a significant portion of the population, only a small fraction participate actively in Panchayati Raj institutions, and most local governance spaces remain dominated by older and established political actors. Central-level representation of youth is similarly limited, with few young people holding formal political positions, highlighting systemic underrepresentation. The report further notes that while youth are eager to contribute to their communities and are often involved in informal civic activities, institutional mechanisms fail to translate this enthusiasm into meaningful decision-making roles. This underrepresentation at both local and central levels undermines the promise of a democratic, participatory system, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and inclusive structures to facilitate youth participation in governance.

Within educational institutions, political engagement is often polarised along ideological, social, and gendered lines. Student politics can become arenas of conflict rather than dialogue, discouraging participation from those who do not align with dominant groups. Gender disparities further restrict access, with societal expectations, safety concerns, and limited mentorship disproportionately limiting young women and gender-diverse youth from political engagement.

Finally, regional, caste, class, and gender inequalities intersect to further fragment youth participation. Rural and small-town youth encounter fewer platforms and limited mobility, while privileged urban youth dominate decision-making spaces. This fragmentation is mirrored across civic, academic, and political arenas, creating a landscape where youth participation is uneven, highly selective, and often symbolic. Addressing these layered challenges requires deliberate interventions to build safe, inclusive, and genuinely participatory spaces in educational institutions, workplaces, and governance structures that recognise and value the perspectives of all young people.

How Youth Are Changing the Narratives

Case study 1

Youth-n-Democracy – Enabling Youth Participation for Inclusive Governance in India

Amid growing concern over shrinking spaces for youth participation in India's democratic and civic life, PRIA's Youth-n-Democracy (YnD) programme offers an alternative imagination of how young people can engage meaningfully with governance and social change. Initiated in 2017, the campaign was rooted in the recognition that democratic learning must begin not in legislatures or political parties but in everyday spaces such as classrooms, campuses, and communities.

Through interactive workshops, dialogues, and creative campaigns, Youth-n-Democracy encourages young people to reflect on their identities, rights, and responsibilities as citizens. Its approach goes beyond mobilising youth for electoral participation; instead, it seeks to nurture values of dialogue, inclusion, and collective problem-solving. The programme focuses particularly on students from low- and middle-income families studying in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities, where opportunities for civic and political engagement are limited.

In 2019, PRIA introduced the Youth-n-Democracy Fellowship to deepen the programme's focus on leadership, critical thinking, and civic agency. Fellows are mentored to design and lead campaigns addressing pressing local issues. Students initiated campaigns for safe campuses, demanding the formation of Internal Committees, conducting regular sensitisation training, and advocating for active grievance redressal mechanisms. Other campaigns included peer-led discussions on gender equality, environmental awareness, civic responsibilities, digital citizenship, and community dialogue, as well as street theatre and awareness drives on issues such as gender-based violence and local governance. These initiatives led to committees being established, training regularised, and campaigns translating into tangible policy action.

The fellowship has also fostered sustained civic engagement, enabling participants to mentor peers, implement participatory research projects, and co-create knowledge that informs local

governance and education policies. What distinguishes Youth-n-Democracy is its emphasis on everyday democracy — the belief that participation is embedded in how young people question, organise, and collaborate within their communities. By grounding democratic practice in lived realities, PRIA's initiative transforms participation from a privilege into a right, one that is inclusive, accessible, and transformative.

Case study 2

Kadam Badhate Chalo – Youth-Led Approaches to Gender Justice and Community Safety

Kadam Badhate Chalo (KBC), an initiative of the Martha Farrell Foundation, exemplifies a youth-led approach to addressing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and fostering participatory engagement among young people. The programme provides a structured platform where youth can voice concerns related to gender, safety, and social inequities, collectively identify problems, and develop locally relevant solutions.

Central to the programme is peer-to-peer learning and dialogue exchange, where critical issues are discussed in a safe and supportive environment. From a young age, participants are encouraged to question existing practices and policies — for instance, the absence of complaint boxes in schools or lack of safety measures in public spaces — without fear of reprisal. The programme nurtures critical thinking and cultivates a culture where asking questions is a vital step toward social change rather than an act of defiance.

A key component of the programme is the participatory safety audit, wherein youth collaboratively assess schools and communities to identify safe and unsafe spaces. This exercise frequently reveals divergent experiences: areas deemed safe by boys may be perceived as unsafe by girls, highlighting gendered dimensions of safety. Following the audit, youth co-create recommendations to improve environments, which are presented to school authorities and local governance bodies. These efforts have led to the formation of POCSO committees, installation of complaint boxes, and creation of safe and inclusive learning spaces in schools. Examples of actions include elevating school boundary walls, regulating the proximity of liquor outlets near school premises, and improving infrastructure for safer mobility.

By centring youth voices, KBC transforms young people from passive recipients of protection into active agents of change. The programme demonstrates that when youth are empowered to identify challenges, develop solutions, and engage with institutional stakeholders, they can meaningfully contribute to safer, more equitable, and participatory communities.

Case study 3

Youth Ki Awaaz: Driving Change Through Youth-Led Narratives on Gender and Social Justice

In India, many young people, particularly from marginalised communities, often struggle to have their voices heard. Youth Ki Awaaz has created a space where their experiences, opinions, and insights are valued and where they can translate into real social and policy change. What began as a platform to train young writers has evolved into a vibrant community of over 200,000 contributors, united by the belief that personal experiences can influence society.

The platform has pioneered numerous campaigns that address pressing issues affecting youth and communities. Early initiatives like **#Unmanifesto** gathered thousands of public opinions on policies they wanted the government to reconsider, giving youth a sense of civic ownership and participation. Campaigns such as **#WhatsMyID** challenged racism, sparking conversations about inclusion and equality in schools, workplaces, and public spaces. Later initiatives expanded to civic engagement, with campaigns like **#JetSetVote**, India's one of the largest voter awareness programme, receiving over 16,000 responses and encouraging young people to participate actively in democracy.

Youth Ki Awaaz has also made its mark in gender justice. Initiatives like **#Periodपाठ** brought attention to menstrual hygiene barriers, reaching millions of people and influencing national policy, contributing to the reduction of Goods and Services Tax (GST) on sanitary products. **#Access4All** engaged over **1 million people** in discussions on accessibility and inclusion, highlighting the needs of differently-abled individuals.

The impact of these campaigns goes beyond online engagement. Stories shared on the platform have influenced policymakers, elevated local issues to national attention, and inspired collective action at the grassroots level. For instance, policy consultations informed by youth perspectives on urban climate action have led to frameworks ensuring youth participation in resilient city planning. By providing a platform, mentorship, and guidance, Youth Ki Awaaz has empowered youth to act as change-makers, whether advocating for better public services, raising awareness about social issues, or shaping civic discourse.

Today, Youth Ki Awaaz is more than an online platform; it is a movement. It demonstrates that when marginalised youth are given tools, guidance, and space to speak, they can transform communities, influence policy, and foster a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient society.

Case study 4

Synergy Sansthan – Building Leadership and Civic Engagement Among Marginalised Youth

Synergy Sansthan works with marginalised youth from rural and tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh, India, providing them with knowledge, guidance, and opportunities to become active

participants in their own development. These are communities where access to quality education, civic platforms, and resources is limited, and where young people often feel unheard. Synergy Sansthan addresses this by creating spaces and programmes that nurture leadership, critical thinking, and community engagement.

A cornerstone of their work is the *Yuva Aagaz, Yuva Aawaz* programme, an annual initiative that brings together marginalised youth from different districts of Madhya Pradesh. Through workshops, discussions, and interactive sessions, participants explore pressing issues such as education, local governance, environmental challenges, and social inequalities. They are encouraged to critically analyse their surroundings and develop practical solutions, building both confidence and problem-solving skills.

Another key initiative is the establishment of Youth Resource Centres (*Yuvalaya*). These centres provide books, digital resources, and safe spaces for learning and dialogue. For instance, in one district, a group of marginalised youth identified poor sanitation and neglected public spaces as urgent local concerns. They used the Yuvalaya as a planning hub, conducted awareness campaigns, and engaged with local authorities to implement small but meaningful changes, including waste management drives and community clean-up initiatives.

Through such programmes, Synergy Sansthan ensures that youth are not passive observers but active changemakers. They learn to collaborate, advocate, and lead initiatives that have tangible effects on their communities. By offering mentorship, knowledge resources, and platforms for action, the organisation transforms confidence into leadership and ideas into impact, fostering a generation committed to social justice and civic responsibility.

All the above mentioned initiatives illustrate how youth-led approaches can effectively address structural gaps in participation, safety, and gender justice. By using creative tools such as art, theatre, digital storytelling, and participatory research, youth are able to document and communicate lived experiences, raising awareness and demanding safer, more inclusive spaces.

Enhancing and Sustaining Youth Participation

Meaningful youth participation is not merely symbolic; it is central to building inclusive, resilient, and equitable societies. Young people bring nuanced perspectives, lived experiences, and innovative approaches that are critical for addressing complex social challenges, particularly around gender justice, safety, and democratic engagement. Yet in India, participation remains highly uneven, fragmented, and often restricted to those with social privilege. Structural barriers, patriarchal norms, unsafe spaces, and weak policy implementation constrain many youth, especially young women and gender-diverse individuals, from exercising agency or contributing to decision-making. Bridging these gaps requires platforms that are genuinely participatory, safe, and attentive to the diverse realities of youth across regions and socio-economic contexts.

Sustaining youth engagement demands deliberate investment in capacity building, mentorship, and leadership development. When young people are equipped with skills, critical thinking, and confidence, they are better able to navigate institutions, advocate effectively, and challenge entrenched hierarchies. Institutional support from schools, colleges, workplaces, and local governance structures is equally crucial, providing both the legitimacy and mechanisms for youth to contribute meaningfully.

Beyond individual skill-building, sustainable participation hinges on systemic integration. Youth-led initiatives such as participatory safety audits, community campaigns, and fellowship programmes demonstrate that when youth are empowered to identify problems, co-create solutions, and hold institutions accountable, participation becomes transformative rather than tokenistic. These practices position young people not just as beneficiaries but as knowledge producers and advocates, capable of reshaping policies, social norms, and decision-making processes. By embedding such approaches into the fabric of governance, education, and civic life, youth participation evolves from sporadic involvement into a sustained, democratic endeavour.

Conclusion

Youth engagement is central to reimagining gender justice in India, making it intersectional, inclusive, and rooted in the lived experiences of diverse communities. Grassroots initiatives such as PRIA's Youth-n-Democracy programme and the Martha Farrell Foundation's Kadam Badhate Chalo demonstrate how young people can move beyond symbolic participation to become knowledge producers and advocates, shaping solutions, challenging entrenched hierarchies, and demanding accountability. To make gender justice meaningful and sustainable, structural, social, and institutional barriers must be addressed, ensuring that youth voices occupy the centre of policies, institutions, and social movements. Such engagement transforms participation into a continuous, democratic, and inclusive force that drives equity, safety, and systemic change across society.

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