

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN GENDER JUSTICE AND RESILIENCE

VOICES FROM INDIA

Presented by Samiksha Jha

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SCOPES AND FOCUS OF THE STUDY

India's demographic dividend lies in its youth, yet their participation in democratic and gender-just processes remains uneven. This presentation explores how young people across India are redefining civic engagement through initiatives that connect everyday life with larger questions of justice and resilience.

KEY FOCUS AREAS

1

Youth participation as a site of gender and social transformation

2

Challenges of exclusion and institutional neglect

3

Case studies of youth-led and community-based interventions



INDIA'S YOUTH

A COMPLEX LANDSCAPE

Youth participation in India encounters multiple challenges shaped by socio-economic, cultural, and regional diversity. The experiences and aspirations of young people differ across rural–urban, class, caste, religion, and gender lines.

**PATTERNS AND
INEQUALITIES
IN YOUTH
PARTICIPATION**



KEY CONCERNS

1

Platforms for engagement are often non-democratic and exclusionary, privileging youth with prior exposure and social capital (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007).

2

Participation remains limited to relatively privileged groups, leaving many voices unheard.

3

Socio-cultural hierarchies and institutional neglect reinforce patterns of marginalization.



EDUCATION AND THE NARROW DEFINITION OF PARTICIPATION



In education, youth engagement is often equated with attendance, grades, and compliance, ignoring critical and transformative aspects of learning.

2

Educational spaces that stifle dialogue limit critical thinking and future civic participation.

1

Questioning norms or expressing dissent is frequently discouraged (Singh & Rai, 2025).

KEY CONCERNS

4

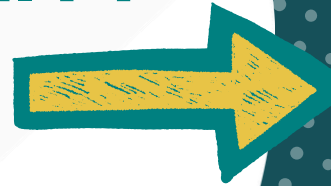
Inadequate safety discourages girls and gender-diverse youth from active participation in learning spaces.

3

Legal safeguards such as the POCSO Act (2012) mandate Child Protection Committees, but implementation is poor – only 199 of 1,379 Delhi schools complied (Martha Farrell Foundation, 2023).



SAFETY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION



The UGC Regulations (2015) require every higher education institution to form an Internal Committee (IC) and hold regular gender sensitisation sessions.

IMPLEMENTATION GAPS:

1

Out of 1,113 universities and 43,796 colleges, only 238 universities and 372 colleges reported forming ICs or holding trainings (UGC, 2023).

2

Weak institutional compliance reflects policy-level failures and minimal awareness among students and educators.

3

Unsafe, unequal environments lead to linear and exclusionary participation, deterring women and marginalised genders from academic and political engagement



ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION AND GENDERED EXCLUSIONS



Youth engagement in the workforce mirrors educational inequities – divided by region, caste, class, and gender.

1 Female youth participation remains low despite progressive laws like the Vishakha Guidelines (1997) and the PoSH Act (2013).

2 Weak enforcement and fear of stigma discourage women from reporting workplace harassment (V. N. & Rao, 2024).

4 Structural barriers thus reinforce cycles of economic insecurity and political disempowerment.

3 According to ILO (2024), nearly 89% of Indian youth are unemployed or underemployed, constraining their civic and economic participation.

CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION



Economic and educational exclusions restrict young people's broader engagement in democratic spaces.

NSSO data show youth unemployment and poor-quality employment are highest among SCs, STs, and minorities (Mamgain & Tiwari, 2016).

Evidence:



Youth in India Study (IIPS & Population Council, 2010): women and marginalised youth face limited opportunities for civic and political participation due to gender norms and institutional exclusion.

EMERGING VOICES AND INCLUSIVE PROGRAMMES

Despite challenges, various government and community programmes demonstrate the potential of structured youth engagement.

EXAMPLES:

1 Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP): Enhances awareness on girls' education and gender equality.

2 National Programme for Youth and Adolescent Development (NPYAD): Builds leadership and life skills.

3 National Service Scheme (NSS): Engages millions of students in community development and gender sensitisation.

2 Socio-cultural barriers limit access for marginalised youth.

3 Need for consistent mentoring, institutional accountability, and intersectional inclusion.

YET:

1 Implementation varies across regions.





WHY YOUTH PARTICIPATION MATTERS

1

India's vast and diverse youth population holds immense potential yet faces persistent structural inequities. Young people from low- and middle-income and marginalised backgrounds often remain excluded from decision-making, even as they lead grassroots movements for justice and resilience.

Participation is not merely demographic but a source of insight, innovation, and inclusive policy design.

2

Civil society and community initiatives create safe spaces for leadership, dialogue, and advocacy.

3

Youth participation is transformative: it challenges exclusion, nurtures agency, and enriches democratic discourse with lived experience

CURRENT GAPS AND CHALLENGES IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Youth participation in India remains uneven and limited by structural, social, and institutional barriers. While youth are recognised as agents of change, their engagement often remains symbolic rather than substantive.

1

Tokenistic participation

Youth voices included in committees or forums but rarely influence decisions.

2

Exclusion within collectives

Patriarchal and hierarchical norms limit leadership for young women and gender-diverse youth.

3

Social stigma

Expression of gender or sexual identity often leads to exclusion or backlash.

4

Weak institutional mechanisms

Safety committees in schools/universities and workplace policies like the PoSH Act often exist only on paper.



5

Limited political participation

Despite decentralised governance (73rd & 74th Amendments), youth representation in Panchayati Raj and municipal bodies remains low (PRIA, 2007).

6

Polarised student politics

Ideological divides and gender barriers discourage inclusive political engagement.

7

Intersectional inequalities

Caste, class, gender, and regional divides restrict rural and marginalised youth, while urban privileged youth dominate spaces.

Result

Youth participation remains fragmented, selective, and performative, underscoring the need for inclusive, safe, and equitable platforms that genuinely empower all young people to engage in civic and political life.

HOW YOUTH ARE CHANGING THE NARRATIVES

YOUTH-N-DEMOCRACY

**ENABLING YOUTH PARTICIPATION FOR
INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE**



PRIA's Youth-n-Democracy (YnD) programme reimagines how young people engage with democracy and governance. Initiated in 2017, it begins where participation truly matters – in classrooms, campuses, and communities. Through interactive workshops, dialogues, and creative campaigns, the initiative helps young people from 2-3 tier cities and low-income backgrounds understand citizenship, dialogue, and inclusion beyond elections.

In 2019, the Youth-n-Democracy Fellowship deepened this approach by mentoring students to design campaigns on issues such as safe campuses, gender equality, environment, and civic rights. Their campaigns led to the creation of Internal Committees, safety protocols, and regular sensitisation sessions in schools and colleges. Many fellows have continued to mentor peers, co-create participatory research, and influence education and local governance policies.

What makes YnD distinctive is its belief in everyday democracy – nurturing participation as a lived practice where youth learn to question, collaborate, and act. It transforms civic engagement from privilege to a right, making democratic participation inclusive and transformative.

KADAM BADHATE CHALO

YOUTH-LED APPROACHES TO GENDER JUSTICE

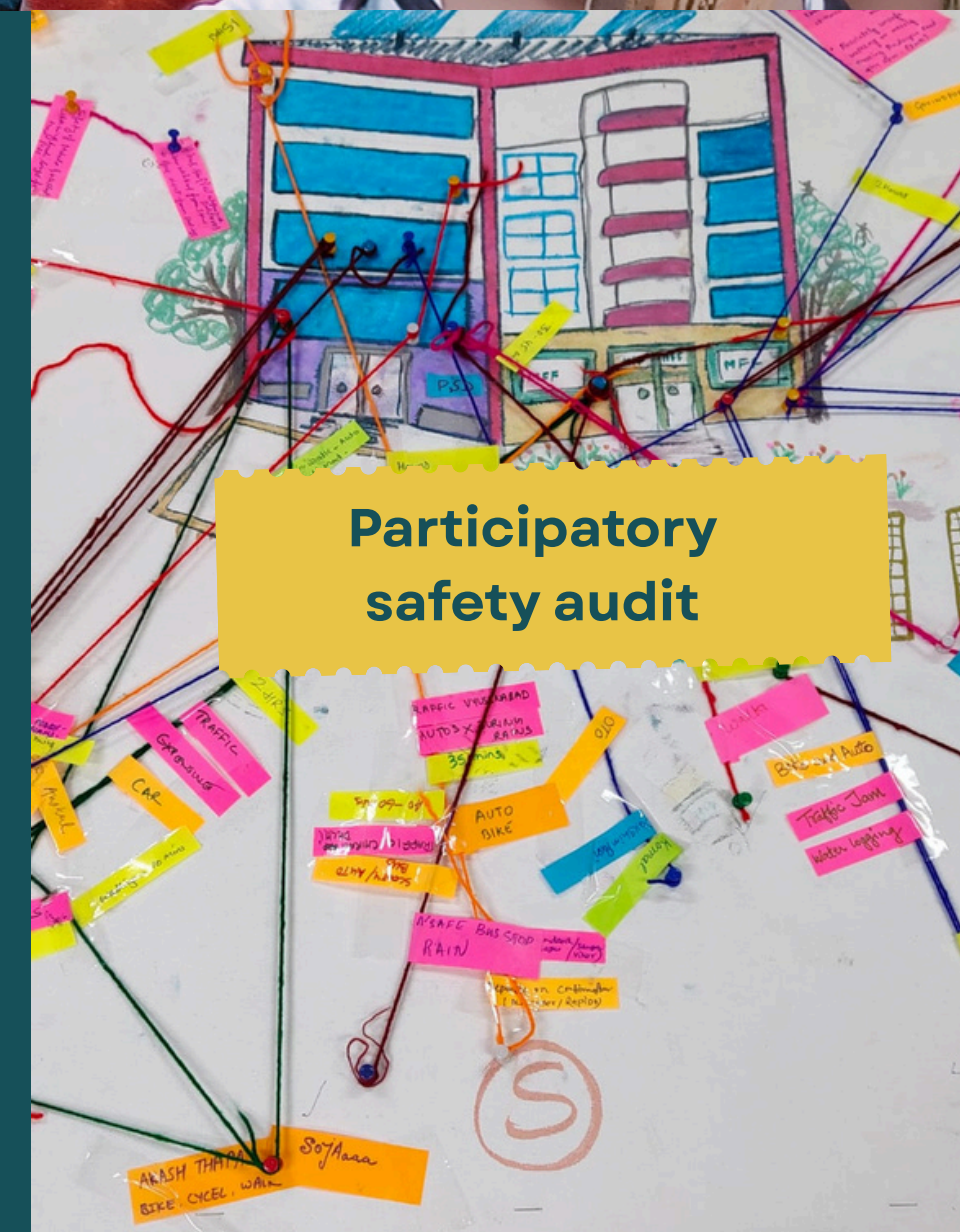




The Kadam Badhate Chalo (KBC) programme of the Martha Farrell Foundation empowers young people to address sexual and gender-based violence through dialogue and collective action. It provides safe spaces where youth discuss gender, relationships, and safety, and question everyday practices that normalise violence.

At its core lies the participatory safety audit, where girls and boys map safe and unsafe spaces in schools and communities. This process often reveals contrasting perceptions of safety – highlighting gendered realities that are otherwise ignored. Youth then co-create recommendations and present them to school authorities and local bodies.

Their advocacy has led to visible change – formation of POC SO committees, installation of complaint boxes, safer school infrastructure, and improved mobility for girls. By engaging directly with institutions, youth shift from being recipients of protection to active agents of change, shaping safer, more gender-equal communities.





YKA

YOUTH KI AWAAZ

**DRIVING CHANGE THROUGH
DIGITAL NARRATIVES**

Youth Ki Awaaz (YKA) has revolutionised youth-led storytelling, giving voice to those excluded from mainstream platforms. What began as a space for young writers has evolved into a movement of over 200,000 contributors shaping conversations on gender, inclusion, and democracy.

Through campaigns such as #Unmanifesto and #JetSetVote, YKA mobilised thousands of young citizens to voice their opinions on policy and elections. Its gender-focused initiatives like #Periodपाठ helped influence the removal of GST on sanitary pads, while #Access4All brought over a million people into discussions on disability and inclusion.

The platform's power lies in transforming personal experience into collective advocacy. Stories published by youth have reached policymakers, shaped consultations, and led to reforms in civic and climate governance. YKA proves that when youth are given the tools and space to speak, they can redefine both public discourse and policy.

Working in rural and tribal Madhya Pradesh, Synergy Sansthan nurtures leadership among youth who have long remained excluded from civic and development spaces. Through initiatives such as Yuva Aagaz, Yuva Aawaz, young people come together to reflect on issues like education, local governance, and environmental justice.

The organisation's Youth Resource Centres (Yuvalayas) serve as learning and action hubs, offering resources, mentorship, and safe spaces for discussion. In one district, youth used the centre to plan campaigns on sanitation and waste management, later partnering with local authorities to implement change.

Synergy's approach turns marginalised youth from passive recipients into active changemakers. By fostering confidence, critical thinking, and collaboration, it builds a generation of leaders committed to social justice, equality, and community-driven transformation.



Synergy
SANSTHAN

**BUILDING LEADERSHIP
AMONG MARGINALISED
YOUTH**



ENHANCING AND SUSTAINING YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Meaningful youth participation is central to building inclusive and equitable societies. Young people offer fresh perspectives and innovation on issues of gender justice, safety, and democratic engagement.

Yet in India, participation remains uneven—limited by patriarchal norms, unsafe spaces, and weak institutional mechanisms that marginalise young women and gender-diverse youth.

Sustaining engagement requires inclusive platforms, capacity building, and institutional support. When youth lead initiatives—like safety audits, community campaigns, or fellowship programmes—they move from being beneficiaries to active knowledge producers and advocates.

Empowered youth make participation transformative, continuous, and truly democratic.

Thank you
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