

WGNRR: Youth Policy

Engaging, Empowering and Encouraging Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Introduction: Young People, Freedoms and Choices

WGNRR reaffirms the stance of young activists and youth movements to fully exercise and enjoy the full spectrum of their sexual and reproductive rights, should they choose to exercise them. Young people face particular challenges to the full enjoyment of their rights due to their age that other groups may not. They are not just unable to access resources and services, for example, but are often overlooked as legitimate beneficiaries of those resources and services; especially when it involves their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Young people are not able to access resources or services as they tend to have fewer financial means or assets, limitations on the amount & quality of information available to them, and an added block of stigma, fear and culture of silence. The lack of legitimacy for young people is usually due to archaic, often untrue and persistent beliefs that a) young people do not/should not have sex, and b) young people require “protecting” and “taking care of”. Our understanding of sexual rights of young people regarding sex, intimacy, and friendship are central concerns to human rights as well as individual, community and national development. We are therefore committed to evolving sexuality-positive perspectives within social justice frameworks. It is in this light that we see the idea that youth should not have sex (along with other groups who are also “denied” the right to sexual pleasure—LGBTQI communities, PLWHA, PLWDs, the elderly, etc.) as an idea contrary to human rights and dignity. The work of vibrant, innovative and determined youth who are organising at the local, national and international levels is greatly valued by WGNRR. The inroads made by the ceaseless dedication of youth activists are incredibly important to the realisation of young peoples’ rights and ensuring that their voices are listened to and represented at all levels.

With more than 3 billion people under the age of 25, this is the largest generation of young people¹ in history. 85% of them live in the Global South, coming of age in the midst of systemic economic, social and political injustice; often deprived of access to basic education, and identified as high risk populations for HIV and other infections. Young women are more vulnerable to maternal mortality and morbidity², and have restrictions placed on their freedoms and choices relating to their lives, marriage and children. Unmarried, pregnant young women face stringent barriers to abortion and are forced to seek out unsafe abortions, are ill-equipped with regard to information, and often fear stigmatisation should their families and societies become aware of their pregnancies. These are all legitimate fears and an affront to young peoples’ reproductive dignity.

Thus, ignoring or overlooking the fact that young people engage in sexual activities threatens the health and wellbeing of young people. Such attitudes restrict their access to contraceptives, to safe abortion, towards creating healthy sexual identities, and highly limit their sexual and reproductive choices. It ill-equips young people by denying them important education and access to information to

¹ The World Health Organisation defines young people as all those between the ages of 10 and 24 years of age, youth as between 15 and 24, and adolescents as those aged between 10 and 19.

² Young Women, Unwanted Pregnancy and Unsafe Abortion: Are We Achieving Global Goals?
<http://www.medicalabortionconsortium.org/news/young-women-unwanted-pregnancy-and-abortion-are-we-achieving-global-goals--1064.html>



allow them to make safe choices, without fear of discrimination or judgement. In effect, it denies that young people *have* any sexual and reproductive choices at all.

The concept of “protecting” young people especially manifests itself in decision-making processes, where young people’s concerns and issues tend to be spoken about without much consultation or self-representation of young people. This does not allow young people to participate in processes that directly impact them, nor does it allow for an honest representation of the realities faced by young people, diluting the disparity of issues and rendering “solutions” inadequate and inappropriate. Understanding the disparity of issues is crucial to working together for sustainable solutions, especially as the issues are tempered by considerations of class, race, gender, culture, context, and other factors. Recognising that over half the current global population is under the age of 25, it is important to acknowledge that young people must be invested in and that their rights be fully afforded to them; so that they may be empowered to make safe sexual and reproductive choices and ensure that these are enshrined for young people in the time to come. Young people must be recognised as legitimate actors and stakeholders in today’s political debates. Young people are critical components of all international policies and are highly impacted by the decisions taken- they grow into and through these documents and therefore must be reflected in them. However, young people are largely invisible in most international documents and are excluded from these essential discussions. Keeping all this in mind, it is thus imperative that young people’s sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is looked at seriously and is integrated into all documents & programmes, fully involving young people from the initial conceptualisation through to the monitoring, evaluation and feedback mechanisms. It is essential to view young people as the leaders of tomorrow, but it is just as important to recognise them as leaders of today.

WGNRR & Raising the Voices of the Most Marginalised

WGNRR’s vision and mission which, “*envisages a world where all people can fulfill their sexual and reproductive rights*” reflects our commitment to the realisation of the full sexual and reproductive health and rights of all people and the struggles for reproductive freedoms, with a particular focus on the most marginalised. Young people occupy a particular place in society; and can often be one of the most vulnerable groups. WGNRR is keenly aware of the expertise, commitment and experience of youth leaders and activists; viewing them as equal partners to work with towards a common goal of sexual and reproductive rights for all. Recognising this, WGNRR has resolved to fully integrate youth throughout its programmes & structures, ensuring that recognition of their determined struggles for reproductive justice, as well as their concerns, issues and perspectives are promoted and reflected. WGNRR has also vowed to ensure that this engagement is meaningful, i.e. a crosscutting theme and safeguarding against tokenism. It is imperative that young people’s potential as change makers and crucial actors be acknowledged. Today’s 16 year olds will be 21 in 2015 and it is clear that today’s youth are filled with the impetus for change.

WGNRR recognises the strong, youth-led activism that exists and seeks to engage in partnerships and consultations with activists, networks and other identified partners, as part of the youth engagement. It is essential to see them as resources onto themselves, capable of articulating their struggles & demands. Thus, WGNRR aims at encouraging and supporting youth networks, groups & leaders towards a louder voice within the SRHR framework. Towards the operationalisation of this, WGNRR requires a positive rights-based youth policy that frames all further engagements.



Objectives

WGNRR's objectives with the implementation of the youth policy and the subsequent impacts it hopes to achieve are:

- a) Ensuring that youth perspectives and voices are fully integrated into all WGNRR programmes, campaigns, and materials at all levels.
- b) Increasing youth members and spaces for youth members and youth leadership within the WGNRR Network.
- c) Promote and facilitate networking amongst youth members, organisations and networks within WGNRR.
- d) Ensure spaces and resources for young women and young women-led initiatives within WGNRR.
- e) Mapping the needs and requirements of the WGNRR Youth Members and providing the necessary capacity building, where possible.
- f) Building and strengthening links with existing Youth Alliances and Movements.
- g) Integrating Youth Disaggregated Data, where possible.
- h) Prioritise Youth SRHR in the global SRHR movement.

Definitions

Despite the WHO's definition of youth as those between the ages of 15 and 24, WGNRR defines youth as those between the ages of 15 and 30. It does so while making the following points:

- a) The particular challenges that young people face are not overcome once they are over the age of 24, the issues tend to continue to disempower them and they continue to exist within the periphery. It is important to ensure that these issues and voices are listened to, and that the empowerment of this age group is continued, and that youth; once over the defined age; do not disappear into an overlooked category.
- b) Sustainability of youth leadership is imperative to a lasting empowerment of youth advocacy. Ensuring that the 'older' youth leaders are able to i) facilitate the empowerment of their peers as leaders & players in the movement, ii) ensure continuity and sustainability of the youth integration by working with identified leaders over a longer period of time, iii) consistently ascertain the integration of youth concerns into "adult" programmes and structures as experienced youth leaders, iv) when "phasing out" of youth-led/youth-run initiatives, are able to "phase in" to continue youth work in adult-youth partnerships or other meaningful engagements with youth and, v) are able to utilise and sustain their knowledge, contributing to the overall approach.
- c) Keeping in mind WGNRR's members and their particular challenges within their contexts.



- d) As WGNRR is a global network organisation working with mainly grassroots or community based organisations, WGNRR takes into account the varied age-limit definitions from country to country.

WGNRR views its youth engagement as inclusive of young men and boys, as well as the transsexual and transgender community. However, WGNRR is especially cognizant of the gendered dynamics of sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people, and seeks to continually highlight & critique the gendered aspects and differences.

It is also important to reiterate WGNRR's belief in the importance of viewing youth leaders and activists as equal partners in the movement and key members in decision-making processes.

WGNRR recognises youth as possessing their own sexualities, sexual identities and believes they must be afforded their full bodily integrity. Towards this, WGNRR is keenly aware of the importance of quality, scientific, age-appropriate sex and sexuality education for young people so as to foster confidence, comfort and knowledge of their options, choices and sexuality. WGNRR's Strategic Plan for 2011-2013 states that, "we believe that comprehensive SRHR awareness programming that is gender-sensitive, non-discriminatory and particularly relevant to young people's lives should be integrated into school curricula, in non-formal community-based education programmes, and specific initiatives developed for marginalised, out-of-school youth".

WGNRR's youth members and organisations are governed by the same expectations and membership duties as outlined within WGNRR's membership guidelines.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are categorised by the working methods outlined in the WGNRR Strategic Plan 2011-2013:

GENERAL

- 1) WGNRR should encourage and support youth leaders, ensuring that their voices are heard at all levels. However WGNRR must remain attentive and ensure that the same youth leaders are not favoured over others, so that more youth activists and advocates are continually empowered. WGNRR must remain inclusive in its efforts to engage meaningfully.
- 2) WGNRR must integrate youth-specific consultative and collaborative practices for all activities and events, when requiring feedback from members. We must integrate youth perspectives, opinions and reflect on the impact upon the youth. This is especially true of all WGNRR Campaigns, Statements and Call for Action materials.
- 3) The WGNRR staff must be trained in youth-specific issues and sensitised to youth-friendly language to be used in all communications, as well as having a working knowledge of youth activism in the SRHR movement.
- 4) WGNRR Staff must have *at least* one youth (as defined by WGNRR) full time member of staff, preferably the Youth Affairs Officer; who must be empowered within the office dynamics. In addition, it is important to note that the Youth Affairs Officer must not be treated as a representative of a homogenous youth group, but rather as being able to offer a certain youth perspective which is not always broadly applicable.
- 5) The WGNRR Board must strive to have at least two youth board members at all times, preferably from different regions and backgrounds so as to reflect some of the diversity within



youth activism, to lend their specific youth perspectives to the thematic direction of the organisation, and to avoid, as much as possible, tokenism.

- 6) Institutionally, WGNRR must enforce and integrate the following:
 - a. A youth specific monitoring and evaluation track/system for all activities, programmes and events.
 - b. WGNRR activities must, where possible, strive to ensure that youth-aggregated data is included.
 - c. Ensure that the Youth Programme budget is comparative to other programme budgets
 - i. All activities and projects requiring 20% youth participation, must allocate those resources for the participation from within their own programme budgets, so as to ensure that it is truly cross-cutting.

CAMPAIGNING

- 1) WGNRR must consult youth members at all phases of planning, execution, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of toolkits, activities, programmes etc; to truly ensure meaningful engagement and view youth as important actors and stakeholders.
 - a. This must also be reflected in all WGNRR Campaigns, Statements and Call for Action materials. (This would include presenting as part of the main sessions at RMMs etc, and not just at WGNRR youth-specific sessions)
 - b. This must include proper scoping around the development of activities, tools or other instruments and events to ensure that it is a) a need that requires attention; and b) that it does not replicate an existing resource or activity.

INFLUENCING POLICY

- 1) WGNRR should play a vital role in the integration of youth SRHR issues within the broader SRHR movement in the following ways:
 - a. Ensure that all WGNRR Statements and Communications at all levels have a youth crosscurrent running through them.
 - b. Facilitate “adult-youth” partnerships at Regional Members’ Meetings or in other fora, where possible.
 - c. Encourage and (where able) facilitate mentorship programmes for two-way learning between different, identified age groups.
 - d. Pinpoint and encourage youth-led, youth-run or youth-specific initiatives which contribute to increasing the visibility of youth voices in the SRHR movement, and/or have a strong impact upon it.

NETWORKING

- 1) WGNRR, in working with external youth leaders and youth groups, see them as potential resources for trainings, capacitation or other forms; in both a ‘general’ and ‘youth-specific’ framework.
- 2) The WGNRR network must be built up over time to have a strong, diverse and active youth membership. This must be distinguishable from the general membership as required.
- 3) Continue with WGNRR’s current policy of ensuring that all activities and events have a minimum 20% youth participation. Increasing this percentage as membership expands to include more youth members from diverse backgrounds is encouraged.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT



- 1) WGNRR must contribute to the continued capacitation of its members via knowledge building. This is true not just for bringing the general perspective to the youth, but vice versa and encouraging avenues for knowledge sharing and facilitating the dissemination of collective WGNRR knowledge.
- 2) WGNRR must ensure that its language and communications are youth-friendly and, where relevant, are centred in the language of the youth.

CAPACITY BUILDING

- 1) WGNRR's youth-specific toolkits, programmes or activities must have youth its centre, following the basic principle of 'nothing about us, without us'.
- 2) WGNRR commits to an ongoing investment in the training and capacity building of youth members in various arenas of the SRHR movement, in consultation with their needs.
- 3) WGNRR also commits to an ongoing investment in the training and capacity building of non-youth members by youth trainers on working with youth in a meaningful manner, sensitisation to youth concerns and issues, and other SRHR-related concerns.