

briefings

Turning opinion into action – young women and participation

Young people are increasingly called upon to participate in consultations, at both local and national level, yet the evidence from evaluations is that they are still having little real impact on public decision-making. They may have more opportunities to express their views but this does not mean they are influencing change (Carnegie Young People Initiative 2002).

What do we mean by young women's participation?

In its broadest sense, young women's participation means the involvement of girls and young women in decisions that affect their lives (National Children's Bureau 2001). These range from the small scale: whether they have choices at home over what they watch on television or which newspapers are bought, to larger decisions such as having a say in the choice of a foster parent. As well as having control and being able to make choices in their personal lives, young women's

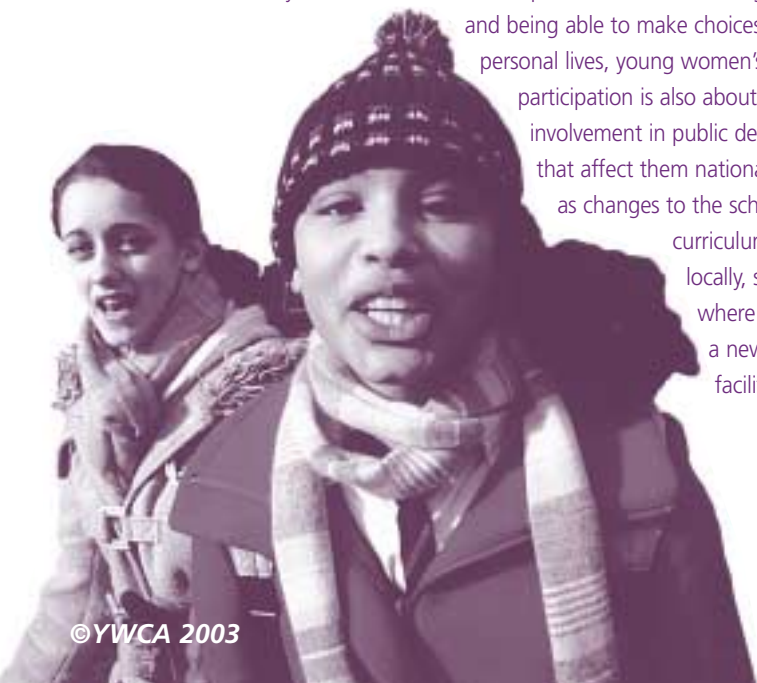
participation is also about their involvement in public decisions that affect them nationally, such as changes to the school curriculum, or locally, such as where to locate a new leisure facility.

Participation involves exercising power and influence. There are different levels of participation carrying with them varying degrees of power and influence. At one end of the spectrum there is consultation – asking young women for their views through surveys and focus groups; at the other is full involvement in decision-making, for example through youth forums, where young people set the agenda and determine the outcome.

Why participate?

As stated in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, young women have a right to participate. This Convention was the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights. It has been ratified by 191 countries, the United States and Somalia being the only two not to do so.

There are many benefits linked to participation. For example, it enables young people to acquire valuable skills and knowledge that will help them in many areas of their lives. It has been found to increase self-esteem and give young people respect within their communities. It improves services, ensuring that they meet young people's needs. It is good for society as it fosters the development of democratic citizenship – giving young people a stake in their local community, creating a sense of common purpose among the generations and increasing social inclusion (Carnegie Young People Initiative 2002).





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Are young women participating in public decision-making?

In this briefing, we'll explore the extent to which young women are participating in civil society. What interests us in particular is how far they are involved in public decision-making and democratic processes – whether they have influence over what goes on in their local communities, country-wide and globally, and what the barriers are to their full participation.

Non-participation in political activities

Evidence from a variety of sources indicates that young people have become increasingly disillusioned with traditional means of 'having a say' through the political system. In our own survey, commissioned just before the last general election, 40 per cent of young women aged 18–30 said they didn't intend to vote in the election (YWCA/Taylor Nelson Sofres 2001). Other sources suggest that actual turnout among young people at the last election fell to its lowest level ever – Mori's estimate is that just 39 per cent, fewer than two in five, of 18–24-year-olds voted (Mori 2002). Among black young people this figure was estimated to be even lower: a Mori poll before the 1997 election found that only 16 per cent of 18–25-year-olds were certain to vote (Operation Black Vote 1997). Half of all 18–24-year-olds never vote in local elections and three in five never vote in elections for the European Parliament (Mori 2002).

Further evidence from an international study found that a majority of 14-year-olds in all countries, including England, do not intend to participate in conventional political activities, such as joining a political party, writing letters to newspapers about social and political concerns and being a candidate for a local or municipal office. England was one of the countries below the international average on the

conventional participation scale (Kerr et al 2002). This lack of interest in political activities is perhaps not surprising given the finding from the same survey that the majority of students in

England were involved in little or no discussion of political issues at home, at school or with their friends.

Young women opting out

Young women's disengagement from politics at all levels is even more marked. Girls have been found to be even less interested in politics than boys (Kerr et al 2002). In a recent study, 67 per cent of the young women surveyed felt they had little or no influence over local government and 71 per cent felt they had little or no influence over national government, of whom the majority felt they had no influence at all (The Guide Association 2001). Girls in the study said they were 'not interested in politics', 'don't know enough about it', and that it 'makes no difference anyway.'

When it comes to participating in community planning, the YWCA's own research into young women in both urban and rural areas highlighted the absence of young women's voices and influence. Our research found that young women are under-represented at all levels of the regeneration process (Alsop et al 2001) and throughout rural decision making forums (Alsop et al 2002).

Do young women care?

Many young people appear to be disillusioned with traditional politics, but this does not mean they don't care. A Mori survey found that 71 per cent of the 16–24-year-olds surveyed wanted a greater say in decisions about their community, including the health service and schools (Mori/Carnegie Young People Initiative 2001).

A YWCA survey of young people's participation confirms these findings. Over half (55 per cent) of the young people (14–15-year-olds) in our survey (YWCA 2003) gave an example of something they would like to change in their schools, local community, country or the world. However, half (46 per cent) were unable to suggest a way by which they might bring about change. More young women than young men felt they had no influence: 12 per cent compared with three per cent of young men.

Only 20 per cent of the respondents suggested ways to bring about change which took account of the democratic process. A higher proportion (26 per cent) suggested ways of change which were outside the democratic process. This reflects a trend that others have identified, that young people are more likely to be involved in actions linked to informal social movement groups such as going on protests and demonstrations, than engaging in traditional political activities (Kerr et al 2002). However, the same European study found that participation in these non-conventional activities is still likely to be low among young people in England.





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Non-participants

Young women who choose not to participate in civil society are under-researched. The impetus for involving young women in public decision-making appears to be an adult-led agenda: 'little of the pressure to participate is coming from young people themselves' (Shucksmith and Hendry 1998). Greater levels of participation in decision-making usually require young people to join groups and meet regularly. It has been suggested that the types of young people who want to get involved in groups may be different from those who do not (Carnegie Young People Initiative 2002).

Our survey asked young people about the groups they belonged to and how they spent their time with others. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most popular activities for the 14 and 15-year-olds in our survey were hanging out with friends, shopping with friends and spending time with family and this was the same for both sexes. However, on membership of groups, we found that young women were far less involved in groups than young men, indeed, it is striking that a third of young women were not involved in any groups or clubs inside or outside of school (YWCA 2003).

Non-participation in civic organisations is also higher among adult women, particularly those in low income groups (Palmer et al 2002).

Although 55 per cent of young people in our survey did give an example of one thing they would like to change, it cannot be ignored that just under half did not express any desire for change. Their disinterest may be linked to a lower sense of belonging to and involvement in the local community that appears common in young people. For example, in a survey for the Commission for Racial Equality, only one per cent of 16–24-year-olds said they felt 'a great deal involved' in the local community (Mori 2002). Similarly, only 19 per cent of 11–16-year-olds in another survey felt that 'having a say in what goes on' makes you a good citizen (Mori 2002). It appears that many young people regard active involvement in the community as having little importance.

Barriers to participation

There are a number of obstacles to young people's participation in public decision-making.

Power dynamics

Young people may think that it is pointless getting involved as they do not have any real power to make things change. A national survey revealed that only 47 per cent of young

people believe that adults listen to young people and act on what they hear (RBA Research Ltd 2002). Young people in another study who were not involved in decision-making believed decision-makers do not care, will not listen and thought that a one-day youth consultation event sounded boring (Back et al 2000).

In a survey carried out a week after the last general election, half of the 16–24-year-olds interviewed said they wanted a greater say but felt that their views were not taken seriously because of their age (Mori 2001). This feeling was reflected in our own survey:

'I would have to grow up as no-one listens to children'
(14-year-old male from Port Talbot, YWCA 2003)

Lack of time

Young women in particular may be simply too busy doing other things such as schoolwork, part time employment, shopping and hanging out with friends. Involvement in participatory projects can take a considerable time commitment. For example, in one study two thirds of those involved in area-wide forums expressed concern about how this was difficult to balance against other interests and expectations (Matthews 2001).

'I have no time to be involved in a group or club because I babysit and work'
(14-year-old female from St Helens, YWCA 2003).

Lack of knowledge/information

Young people may not be aware of their rights and may not know how they can have an influence and make their voices heard. Research has found there to be a positive correlation between civic knowledge and participation in democratic life. The higher the young person's knowledge of democratic values and institutions, the more likely they are to participate in political and civic activities. On a test of civic knowledge, young people in England had difficulty answering questions about democracy and government (Kerr et al 2002). Similarly, in a Mori survey in the second week of the 2001 general election campaign, only 25 per cent of 18–24-year-olds could name their parliamentary constituency and only 23 per cent knew the name of their local MP. Knowledge of local councils is even less: in another survey, only 20 per cent of 15–24-year-olds knew the name of their local councillor (Mori 2002).

Disconnection from the 'system'

Young people may feel alienated from a political system that appears distant, inaccessible and irrelevant to their needs. In our survey, representatives were not mentioned at all beyond school and form reps. There was no mention of councillors or MPs. Only one young person out of 614 (YWCA 2003) mentioned voting as a means to achieve change.

Girls ... said that they were 'not interested in politics', 'don't know enough about it', and that it 'makes no difference anyway'. (The Guide Association 2001).

Eighty four per cent of young people consulted by Mori said they did not trust politicians and 70 per cent said they had never been consulted about their needs by politicians (Demos 1999).

Research has demonstrated that young black people are likely to feel even more alienated from a system dominated by white politicians and white issues (Anwar 1998).

Age

Young people between 16 and 18 are in an ambiguous position. On the one hand 16-year-olds are treated as adults in terms of legal responsibility, they can be in full-time employment and pay tax and national insurance. Yet they cannot vote until they are 18 and cannot stand as an MP until they are 21. Young people are given responsibilities at age 16 without the associated rights. Little wonder that young people (particularly under 18-year-olds) feel ignored and not represented by politicians.

Specific barriers for young women

For young women, their sense of dislocation from the political system is even more marked: they see even less to identify with and put their faith in, when most politicians are middle-aged men. It is a shocking reality that only 18 per cent of MPs at Westminster and 26 per cent of councillors in England are women (Fawcett 2002). Black women's invisibility in public life is even worse – out of the 121 women MPs at Westminster only two are black. In the light of this huge under-representation, it is not surprising that young women are more likely than young men to be disillusioned with politics, less likely to trust political leaders and less likely to believe that any of the political parties pay enough attention to issues of importance to them (Fawcett 2002).

Young women's non-participation in groups, which was so marked in our survey, is linked to the different expectations that society has of girls and young women (see Ruspini 2002). The issue of having little time or encouragement to participate is a real one for many young women, who are often charged with domestic duties such as looking after younger siblings and doing housework in their free time. Young men on the other hand have more time and freedom to participate in groups and activities in the public domain, and hence more opportunities to influence the world around them.

Additionally, young women are more likely to experience internal barriers such as low self-esteem and lack of confidence, mainly stemming from gender inequality, which hold them back from expressing their opinions and believing in themselves as agents of change. The following quotes from

young people in our survey, both expressing a desire for change, illustrate a gender difference in regard to influencing what goes on around them.

'I think young people should have more of a say in what goes on' (15-year-old female from Witney, YWCA 2003)

'I use my voice to influence decisions that affect me and my local area' (14-year-old male from St Helens, YWCA 2003)

While the young man quoted above sees himself actively using his voice to have an influence, the young woman only thinks (*internal and silent*) that young people in general (*not herself*) should have a say.

What can be done?

Across the UK there is a growing interest in involving young people in public decision-making. Yet as the evidence above shows, many young people are put off from engaging in traditional decision-making processes. New and imaginative ways of involving young people are needed to overcome the barriers. There is some evidence that this is starting to happen and beginning to have a positive impact on young people's participation.

National government

A number of government departments are making efforts to proactively involve young people in consultation processes about new policies and in the planning and delivery of services. Young people have been consulted on recent government initiatives such as Transforming Youth Work, Connexions, Quality Protects, the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and the National Healthy School Standard.

The Children and Young People's Unit was set up in 2000 to pull together policy, identify policy gaps and improve the interface between government departments on behalf of 0–19-year-olds. One of its first tasks was to develop a strategy covering all services for children and young people, including health and education. To do this, they carried out a large-scale consultation exercise which asked young people for their views in a questionnaire and in discussion groups across England.

In recognition of the gaps in young people's knowledge about democratic structures and processes, citizenship education has been introduced into the school curriculum. The aim is not only to inform young people about political systems but also to teach them the skills of participation and responsible action through an experiential approach.



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The UK Youth Parliament is a non-party political national forum that aims to give young people a voice that will be heard by local and national government, providers of services to young people and other agencies with an interest in the views and needs of young people.

Local government

Many new initiatives are taking place to involve young people in the decision-making of local councils. The National Youth Agency and Local Government Association (2001) have produced a set of standards for local councils to encourage them to look seriously at the way they involve young people and to improve their practice. Many local authorities are responding with the creation of youth forums and councils. In Barnsley, for example, they employ youth forum support workers – young adults aged between 18 and 24 – with the specific role of involving young people within nine geographical areas in local decision-making processes. In Cambridge, young people have influenced decisions resulting in discounts on bus fares and local leisure cards and the passing of plans for a skateboard park, originally opposed by local residents.

Voluntary sector

There are many examples of innovative practice in this area in the voluntary sector. For example, The Children's Society has produced a 'Charter of Participation' designed by young people and staff which provides guidance on how to involve young people in the work of a wide range of organisations, including how to address the barriers. UNICEF has a scheme called 'Put It To Your MP' which encourages MPs to hold constituency surgeries specifically for young people. The National Children's Bureau has a free membership network open to all young people, which offers the opportunity to participate in discussions, surveys and forums both online and at events.

A number of initiatives have come into being to address the particular barriers that black and ethnic minority young people experience in making their voices heard. Operation Black Vote runs a 'Young Citizens' project that aims to counter the cynicism felt by many young black people. It does this in a number of interesting and innovative ways, for example through an 'MP shadowing' scheme, regionally based roadshows, and by promoting discussion and debate on its website and in its newsletter, 'Young, Gifted and Black'. The National Black Youth Forum is run by and for black young people to articulate their concerns and interests at local,

regional and national level. In response to the complexity of issues facing young Asian women living in Britain, such as sexism, racism, conflict between cultural values and personal aspirations, Newham Asian Women's Project runs a programme called Teens@NAWP, which promotes self awareness, raises self-esteem and builds confidence. The following quote from a participant illustrates its success for one young woman:

'From coming to the group, I feel more confident to talk about women's issues and women's rights – I know more about it'. (Newham Asian Women's Project 2001)

In recognition of the particular difficulties and barriers faced by young women, the YWCA held a one-day conference in conjunction with the UK Youth Parliament to encourage and enable young women from all racial groups and social backgrounds to become more active in public life. *'It's a Girl Thing'* aimed to develop young women's skills, confidence and knowledge through a series of motivational workshops, led by inspiring women who are active in their communities and organisations. A campaigning toolkit specifically for young women was also produced.

Recommendations

Despite the many new initiatives and good practice that are emerging, the YWCA is concerned that only a minority of young people are involved in public decision-making. We are particularly concerned about the level of disinterest shown by young women that our survey revealed and believe that issues of gender inequality must be taken into account when considering young women's participation in civil society. Involvement must be meaningful and effective, with young women being direct beneficiaries. We call on political parties, elected representatives and local authorities to:

- Encourage greater numbers of women from all cultural and social backgrounds to stand as MPs and local councillors and provide role models for younger women
- Modernise decision-making structures in parliament and local councils: for example, do away with antiquated language and procedures; introduce more interactive websites and chatrooms where young people can express their views and vote online
- Encourage MPs and local councillors to be more accessible to young people by holding surgeries at times and in places that are more user friendly for young people e.g. lunchtime at local schools and evenings at youth clubs



Young women's non-participation in groups, which was so marked in our survey, is linked to the different expectations that society has of girls and young women.

- Continue to support the UK Youth Parliament and youth committees and forums and ensure that young women are equally represented and adequately supported in their roles
- Fund community projects that aim to build up the confidence and skills of young women to enable them to participate fully in decisions that affect their lives and their communities

We call on schools to:

- Ensure that young women are involved in decision-making in schools so that they gain real experience of democracy in action, as well as being given factual information about political systems
- Ensure that young women are equally represented on school councils, using quota systems if necessary
- Introduce extra 'coaching' and leadership development opportunities for girls and young women

Some useful guides to young people's participation

Action for a Change – an activity pack on young people and social change by Will Ord and Don Rowe. National Youth Agency.

Changing Places – Young People and Community Action by Ted Huddleston. National Youth Agency.

Up for it – Getting young people involved in local government by Vicki Combe. National Youth Agency.

Participation – Spice it up! – Practical tools for engaging children and young people in planning and consultation. Save the Children.

It's a Girl Thing campaign poster and manifesto for young women. YWCA.

Local and Vocal – Promoting young people's involvement in local decision-making. An overview and planning guide by Peter White. Save the Children.

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YWCA (2003) *Joining In* (full report available in autumn 2003)

YWCA/Taylor Nelson Sofres (2001) *Omnimas Survey*



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