

The Gender Agenda: Youth Perspectives from across the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth Youth Gender and Equality Network (CYGEN) is a youth-led advocacy group that works towards policy change that improves the lives of young people. The network held its inaugural meeting in Malta on 12-17 May 2015. This resultant outcome document is a rights-based policy paper constructed by experienced young leaders, advocates, researchers and campaigners, drawing on their range of grassroots experience, subject and policy expertise. Content was developed in thematic workshops, with individual delegates contributing in their area of specialism.

Discriminatory gender norms, rooted in gender inequality, are a central factor affecting the lives of young people in the Commonwealth and globally today. Young people are too often the victims of gender-based discrimination, prejudice and violence, yet they are central to forming solutions and championing equality.

As the Commonwealth Gender Plan of Action expires in 2015 and the Sustainable Development Goals emerge, which will set the development agenda for the next 15 years, there has never been a more critical time to advocate for improved policies on gender and equality issues. To date, youth voices on gender issues remain largely unheard in formal policy structures, a fact that this network aims to challenge.

This document focuses primarily on five thematic areas that are of key concern across the Commonwealth today: governance; child, early and forced marriage; sexual and reproductive health and rights; youth transitions; and sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics. Below are the “Gender Five” – the network’s priority policy recommendations, one from each of our five key themes.

Gender Five:

- 1. All Commonwealth young people must have access to gender inclusive quality education with relevant curricula which prioritises holistic learning methods, and that prepares young people for decent work, equitable employment opportunities and entrepreneurship.**
- 2. The right of all women, girls and young people from marginalised groups must be recognised in order to successfully influence decision making, to hold leaders to account, and enable them to be partners in peace and stability.**
- 3. Commonwealth institutions must include an understanding of the needs of people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identities, gender expression and sex characteristics, developed in consultation with civil society, in the technical advice they provide to states in areas related to economic security such as education, employment and housing.**
- 4. The Commonwealth Secretariat should commission a gender audit of all policies at the Commonwealth and national government levels for all member states, including for child marriage.**
- 5. Every country should respect the right of all young people to make safe and informed sexual and reproductive health decisions by allocating appropriate health budget to develop a nationwide mobile application or hotline to disseminate youth-friendly information on sexual and reproductive health and rights, health care and services.**

Glossary

Boy child: All children that identify or are perceived as a boy

CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CEFM: Child, Early and Forced Marriage

Child: Below 18 years old, as defined by the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child

CYGEN: Commonwealth Youth Gender and Equality Network

FGC: Female Genital Cutting

Girl child: All children that identify or are perceived as a girl

HIV: Human immunodeficiency virus

MDG: Millennium Development Goal(s)

SOGIGESC: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics

Sex characteristic: The genitals, the physical distinction between male and female

Sexual Orientation: A person's romantic and sexual attractions to individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender

Gender Identity: the internal perception of an individual's gender, and how they label themselves

Gender Expression: the external display of gender, through a combination of dress, demeanour, social behaviour, and other factors, generally measured on a scale of masculinity and femininity

SRHR: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

STI: Sexually Transmitted Infections

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

WHO: World Health Organisation

Women and girls: All persons who identify and are perceived as female including transwomen

Youth: 18-29 years old as defined by the Commonwealth Secretariat

CYGEN believes that every individual should be afforded the rights laid out in this document regardless of an individual's race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, national origin, age, disability, HIV status, profession or any other characteristic. These rights are universal.

Youth Transitions in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship

Education, jobs and entrepreneurship are critical components of successful youth transitions, resilience and wellbeing. However issues of gender disparity, youth unemployment, poverty and lack of security impacts the lives of young people, causing vulnerabilities. These issues can be addressed by rights-based, gender inclusive, quality and holistic education with relevant curricula as well as lifelong learning for active citizenship.

The Commonwealth has not met MDG 2 (universal primary school education), and is far from achieving gender parity in education, with girls facing multiple barriers to access. The Commonwealth also faces a crisis of youth unemployment with a rising percentage of young people who are neither in employment, education or training (NEET). Violence perpetrated by terrorist groups (in Nigeria, Pakistan and Kenya) has also highlighted the need for greater safety and security. Furthermore, lack of data and research regarding the role of gender exclusion in education, employment and entrepreneurship inhibits the formulation of gender inclusive policies.

If a large majority of youth are not equally and comprehensively educated, the future prospects of business, politics, human rights and governance will regress, affecting the development of states.

Principles

The fulfilments of young people's right to holistic, secure and gender inclusive education and employment is essential for successful transition to active citizenship of the Commonwealth and beyond. We believe that young people should:

- Have access to a quality, gender inclusive and democratic education, which equips them with relevant skills and the resilience to participate successfully in today's knowledge-based society.
- Have access to jobs and enterprise development support is pivotal to achieving full and productive employment, decent work and entrepreneurship amongst young people.
- Feel and be safe and secure in education and employment.
- Be able to address negative norms: challenging the phenomenon of privilege and the use of power within hegemonic masculinity and the potential abuse of this power.
- Have access to appropriate programmes and support services, especially young women.

Recommendations

We recommend that:

- All Commonwealth young people must have access to gender inclusive quality education with relevant curricula which prioritises holistic learning methods, and that prepares young people for decent work, equitable employment opportunities and entrepreneurship.
- Commonwealth governments must safeguard the principle of access to education for all, especially for young women, and address the issues of safer schools in the face of global terrorism. Education settings must design and implement safety policies. The Commonwealth must reprioritise the Respect and Understanding agenda, linked to implementing appropriately gendered strategies to tackle both the security issue and the radicalisation of some young people.
- All Commonwealth young people should have access to support services including career counselling, comprehensive SRHR information/services and life skills programmes to enable them to make informed decisions and deal with multiple vulnerabilities.
- All Commonwealth Countries should invest in school to work transitions enablers such as jobs, internships and apprenticeships, support entrepreneurship start-ups and incubators as well as create an enabling environment for businesses to thrive.
- The education system should develop rights-based, gender sensitive and transformative curricula that challenge masculinities and femininities, and encourage young women to take up STEM subjects and careers.

Governance

Context

Young people of all genders, despite being vital stakeholders in driving change, face discrimination in processes of active decision-making and accountability. From decision making at the household level up to local, community and national levels, young people encounter multiple barriers including gender based social norms as well as a range of economic and political factors. Participation of young people of all genders in governance is not only a basic, fundamental human right but also integral to a prosperous and peaceful society. Therefore, young people of all genders should be encouraged and empowered as active citizens in all tiers of governance ranging from the household to national level policy-making through both formal and informal structures.

Principles

We believe that:

- The right of all women, girls and young people from marginalised groups must be recognised in order to successfully influence decision making, to hold leaders to account, and enable them to be partners in peace and stability.
- Breaking gender stereotypes at household, community, national, regional and international levels will challenge the perceptions and attitudes towards decision-making roles.
- Young people of all genders, irrespective of their economic, social and geographic background, should have equality of opportunity in accessing platforms of decision making while also guaranteeing equality at the household level. This removes the double burden on women and girls and promotes their economic empowerment and independence.
- Gender-sensitive and rights-based education needs to be ensured so that young people of all genders are aware of their rights and roles as citizens, and have the skills and confidence to be agents of change.
- Encouraging an independent and inclusive civil society movement provides young people of all genders a safe platform to engage in discourse, to share resources and to influence policy-makers and duty-bearers.

Recommendations

We recommend that:

- Gender mainstreaming through all governance institutions including gender training and legal reform, such as family friendly measures, alongside rights-based gender-sensitive education and increased public awareness campaigns on gender roles with focus on all sections of the community.
- A quota of 30%-50% of women in political positions and decision making institutions and ensuring meaningful representation of all genders, while also introducing quotas for meaningful engagement and consultation with young people of all genders on decisions that affect their lives and creating accountability mechanisms.
- Introducing mandatory citizenship curriculum and strengthened government partnership with civil society to support leadership, skills development and mentoring programmes to encourage change in the community attitudes, while also increasing focus on enabling young people of all genders to have a role in the governance of their school, college and university.
- Commonwealth Nations and the United Nations must protect, through legislation, an active civil society, freedom of expression and safe spaces provided for independent youth networks through utilising creative and innovative technology for information-sharing, open data and accountability.
- Governments must engage young people of all genders in the implementation and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals, so that world leaders can be held to account.

Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics (SOGIGESC)

Context

Discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics is widespread across the Commonwealth. In 41 Commonwealth states, existing laws criminalise SOGIGESC communities, organisations, our families, and allies. Legislation and attitudes act to hinder our access to basic Human Rights.

Our communities experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, social isolation, and contraction of STIs. SOGIGESC communities need accessible health practices, inclusive of but not limited to mental, physical, sexual, and reproductive health, in particular groups with intersecting needs. SOGIGESC individuals are disproportionately vulnerable to economic exclusion due to abandonment by family, homelessness, a lack of protection in employment, education and housing. Economic costs are borne by individuals, our families, communities and nations.

While all Commonwealth countries have constitutions and legislation that are intended to protect their citizens and guarantee their rights, SOGIGESC persons are not equally afforded these rights.

Our communities are prevented from exercising their freedoms of association, expression, and assembly. Our organisations face problems in registering as an entity, limiting our ability to act effectively in support of our communities.

Principles

We believe that young people in all their diversity have the right to:

- Equal access to, or the creation of, safe health practices.
- Economic security through equal access to, and protection in, education, employment & housing.
- Freedom from legal persecution based on SOGIGESC status.
- Protection through the vigorous application of existing constitutions and legislation.
- Freedom of expression, association and assembly through full inclusion in civil society spaces.

Recommendations

We recommend that, in line with the values of the Commonwealth Charter:

- Commonwealth institutions work closely with states to create and improve access to safe, non-discriminatory, and appropriate health practices using internationally recognised health indicators, as per the standards of the WHO, to assess progress.
- Commonwealth institutions must include an understanding of the needs of SOGIGESC communities, developed in consultation with our communities, in the technical advice they provide to states in all areas related to economic security.
- Member states work with Commonwealth institutions and other actors to expedite a process of reviewing and amending discriminatory legislation to be inclusive, as enshrined in their constitutions and in line with regional and international mechanisms.
- Member states and Commonwealth institutions work to provide equal protection under existing laws, and to extend protection to other areas, including protection from violence, in labour rights, education and housing.
- Member states must recognise the existence and operation of SOGIGESC organisations as legal entities and remove legislation that bans participation in civil society.

Child, Early and Forced Marriage¹

Context

Child marriage is a human rights violation. According to UNICEF, 900 million people alive today were married as children. Of which, 720 million women and 156 million men, thereby disproportionately affecting females. 15 million girls are married each year, more than half of which reside in the Commonwealth. The practice of child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and poverty. Discriminatory laws, cultural and traditional norms as well as crisis such as civil strife, war and natural disasters are all additional drivers. The hardest to reach children are out-of-school girls, married girls, pregnant or mothering girls, and other marginalised groups. The consequence of child marriage is the severe abridgement of rights for girls and boys that lead to the significant decline of opportunities to live a full, happy, healthy and productive life. The impact of child marriage is life changing, leaving children vulnerable to violence, health complications and other threats to their wellbeing. Ending child marriage requires strong political will combined with proper implementation at the grassroots.

Principles

We believe that:

- Young people have the right to lead healthy, happy, informed and empowered lives.
- Marriage should be entered into by choice. Everyone should be free to choose if, when and whom to marry.
- Ending child marriage is the responsibility of everyone everywhere.
- Interventions should be based on tested, proven solutions to end child marriage and empower young people.
- All of this is underpinned by human rights law.

Recommendations

The Commonwealth as a network of 53 member states that have a presence in every region of the world has a unique opportunity to galvanise efforts to end child marriage. We recommend that:

- The Commonwealth Secretariat should commission a gender audit of all policies at the Commonwealth and national government levels for all member states, including child marriage.
- National governments should allocate adequate budget for all public services, which should be made youth-friendly, and special, family support services should be given to child brides and their families, which should all be monitored and evaluated.
- National governments should enact and harmonise secular, national marriage laws and policies, including: Harmonisation of national and customary laws including divorce; Minimum age of marriage of 18 for girls and boys; Compulsory birth and marriage registration for all births and all marriages/unions that cannot be substituted by any other document. Member states should adopt proactive policies to tackle the issue in a multi-sectoral approach.
- National governments should invest in free, safe, quality, compulsory education for young people, with a focus on reaching out-of-school girls with vocational and life-skills based training. Schools should include rights-based and gender-transformative curricula.
- National governments should develop an on-going mechanism for two-way engagement and communication between government and relevant stakeholders, including community, local traditional leaders, religious leaders, teachers, local government authorities, parents, and young people.

¹ Here on referred to as child marriage

Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights

Context

We young people in all our diversity believe that underlying gender inequalities and unequal power relations create social, cultural and religious barriers, preventing us from achieving our full potential to bodily autonomy and rights. We believe that Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) is a fundamental human right which is indispensable and contributes to the freedom, equality and dignity of all people.

Whilst international and regional mechanisms exist, they are not always reflected in national legislation and cultural practices. Young people, particularly women and girls, are disproportionately affected by gender inequality and discriminatory social norms across the globe. Young people aged 10 to 24 represent over one quarter of the global population but exercise limited autonomy over their lives and bodies. There are over 60 million girls married before their 18th birthday and 16 million girls aged 15 - 19 giving birth every year. Worldwide, 130 million women and girls have undergone female genital cutting. Every minute, a young woman is newly infected with HIV. 21.6 million women and girls undergo unsafe abortions worldwide each year with 47,000 dying due to complications.

Young people experience crosscutting challenges in exercising their SRHR. Poverty and a wide range of development issues such as access to health services and education is fuelling this situation. Youth voices are critical to changing this.

Principles

We believe that young people in all their diversity have the right:

- To bodily integrity with freedom of sexual expression, fulfilment and pleasure.
- To make informed, healthy choices about their SRHR and exercise consent in all aspects of their sexual life.
- To access quality, affordable, youth-friendly services, and SRHR information.
- To live in a society free from sexual and gender based discrimination.
- To live free from the threat, or experience of gender based violence in all its forms.

Recommendations

We believe that discriminative social norms, limited funding, and lack of access to services and information are key barriers to realise SRHR. Our vision is a world where every country invests and has systems in place to implement and enforce CEDAW article 5.² As a first step to achieve this, we recommend that:

- As of the financial year allocate appropriate health budget to a nationwide mobile application and or hotline to disseminate youth-friendly information on SRHR, health care and services.
- Develop, implement, enforce and finance a national action plan on violence against women and girls. This explicitly addresses intimate partner violence and harmful traditional practices. This will be developed in consultation with civil society organisations.
- Within the next two years train and champion religious and traditional leaders to change discrimination against women and girls with a focus on improving their SRHR.
- Appoint a National Youth SRHR Special Envoy to facilitate dialogue between civil society and governments.

² Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination Against Women: "To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women".