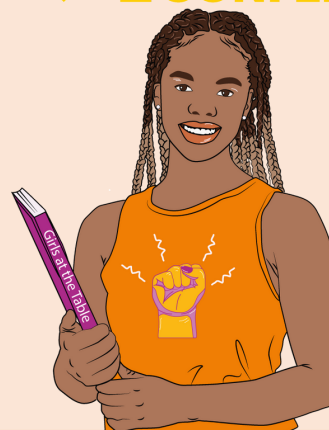




No more excuses!

Accountability mechanisms for girls and young women

SUMMARY REPORT



On 19 July 2023, at the **WD2023 Conference in Kigali**, Rwanda, Amref Health Africa, the Adolescent Girls Investment Plan (AGIP), and its members hosted the **concurrent event 'No more excuses! Accountability mechanism for girls and young women'**.

This session, facilitated by young people, **showcased approaches to achieving accountability for adolescent girls and young women in all their diversity**. We heard from diverse stakeholders on challenges, solutions, and commitments which advance power being shifted to adolescent girls - nothing about them, without them.

We are thrilled to share that the event not only proved to be popular amongst conference attendants (the room was full!) but that **our speakers and all participants brought invaluable contributions to advance discussions on shifting power to adolescent girls and young women**. A huge thank you to all who made it possible – our moderators, our speakers, our supporters, and of course everyone who was there on the day and shared their attention and ideas so generously.

This event summary report is intended to share **highlights from the panel and the outcomes of the interactive activity**. It is designed to support you in your own advocacy, and **we hope you will become an active ally and continue advocating for more power to be shifted to adolescent girls and young women**.

Presenting 'Lessons on girl- and youth-led systems accountability': an overview of the current mechanisms

Adolescent girls represent one of the most marginalised demographic groups globally: their unique needs often get overlooked in both child-rights, and women's-rights conversations, and their voices go unheard in decisions on policy, climate, health, and beyond. **Accountability for adolescent-focussed commitments is not guaranteed either**: global processes, such as Generation Equality, lack adolescent-led accountability mechanism. The AGIP-funded and ICRW-conducted research **'From Advocacy to Action: Lessons on girl- and youth-led systems accountability in India, Kenya and Uganda'** gives an insightful **overview of the different methods and processes employed by adolescents** who are already practicing holding decision-makers to account within their communities and countries. It also emphasises that **there are still many – often systemic – barriers faced by young activists**.



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Sharing professional and lived experiences from the realities of demanding accountability for adolescent girls and young feminists

Luisa Fernanda Castro Becerril, Girls Not Brides, Mexico

Luisa illustrated the **complexity and bureaucracy of the political system** in her native Mexico. Such systems make it nearly impossible for young people to find out what is happening where, and when potential engagement opportunities within government spaces arise. Luisa emphasised that information is only accessible through close family members or friends who work in government departments, or if a dedicated staff member is tracking what is happening from within. Unfortunately, in Luisa's experience, government members often only approach Civil Society Organisation when a concrete goal can be met through them, but not to collaborate more broadly.

Luisa shared **five recommendations to enable more meaningful engagement of youth within decision-making processes**: (1) **take tangible action**; (2) **stop being adult-centric** – validate youth experiences instead; (3) **make accountability mechanisms accessible** and youth-friendly; (4) **stop asking youth-led organisation's to adopt government agendas** – champion youth-led agendas instead; (5) create **accessible and realistic funding processes**.

'It's exhausting to keep hearing that everyone is going to start building the strategies to include young people - just do it, it's not that hard. [...] Acknowledge that our experiences, whatever those are, are valid and that gives us expertise because we are living it, we know what is happening and we know what we need, just let us be there.'

Leila Abdulkeir Isaak, Youth Voices Action Initiative, Kenya

Leila shared that **as a young woman and activist it is her right to demand accountability to ensure governments prioritise issues concerning adolescent girls and young women**. Through her work with the Youth Voices Action Initiative, Leila was able to push for young people to be actively included in Technical Working Groups in Kilifi County to advance the drafting of a menstrual hygiene policy, and to establish youth-friendly centres run by the government. Participating in the 'Meaningful Youth Engagement Scorecard' pilot project helped in measuring progress made towards participation of young people in policy processes. Leila shared that young people's perseverance was key in holding their local authorities to account. Leila shared **two recommendations to further advance adolescent- and youth-led accountability and inclusion in policy-making processes**:

- 1. 'We need to address young girls as equal partners because young girls already have the expertise.'*
- 2. 'We need to localise funding to local grassroots organisations because most of them are doing an amazing job in the community and they have no information about grants, but it is important to identify and explore areas of partnership with them.'*

Kenneth B. Miriti, Ministry of Health Kilifi County, Kenya

As the policy-maker counterpart to Leila's community-based work, Miriti shared the perspectives and learnings of decision-makers in the same county. Miriti explained that the first step was to **establish a strategy that enabled youth-led accountability by design**. In the process, it became clear that **girl-specific policies required a specific approach that centres girls' needs and meaningful participation**. Miriti urged fellow policy-makers to follow suit by listening to and learning with girls, creating safe participation spaces, investing in capacity strengthening, employing an intersectional approach, and collaborate with girl- and youth-led organisations. To enable girls to engage in policy processes and demand accountability for commitments made to them, decision makers should ensure the following: (1) **inclusive policies and processes**; (2) **accessible information**; (3) **consultations and dialogues**; (4) **capacity strengthening**; (5) transparent and responsive **feedback mechanisms**; (6) **partnerships** with Civil Society Organisations; and (7) robust **monitoring and evaluation frameworks**.

'When we are engaging with girls [...] it should be girls being at the centre of decision making in terms of meaningful engagement. This concept of meaningful engagement should be over emphasized in various forums because at the end of the day what we want to see is the voice of the girl coming out very loudly [...] Let us listen to girls! Listening is very important because what girls are telling us is what they want.'

Jim Monkel, Youth Ambassador for SRHR, Gender Equality, and Bodily Autonomy at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Speaking from his unique position as Youth Ambassador within the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jim shared his priority appeal for decision-makers to **involve young people at every stage of the policy development process**. Jim urged policy makers to **move from consulting with young people to involvement at every stage of policy development** – and that simply having a formalised Youth Ambassador role did not achieve meaningful engagement. In fact, for any engagement to be meaningful, it needs to be youth-friendly by design, including accessible information and youth-friendly language. Jim also highlighted **the need to take intersecting identities into account**, and to be mindful of several forms and layers of marginalisation. The four pillars of the Netherlands' Feminist Foreign Policy – Rights, Representation, Resources, and Reality Check – ensure that policies align with the lived realities of young women girls.

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'Aligning the policies of the ministry with the realities of the young people is key - often young people are being told that we are the future, we are not only the future, we are more than that, we are also the present. [...] We should acknowledge that young people are carrying lived experiences and we have so much knowledge together that should be used for policy development.'

Plenary World Cafe: gathering input on how to better shift power to adolescent girls and young women

Enriched and educated by the research and panel contributions, **all participants were asked to further deep dive into a discussion on accountability tools and mechanisms for adolescent girls and young women.** Each group addressed a specific area of concern, thus harnessing the knowledge and wisdom present in the room. Based on the input we received, we merged the outcomes of two groups respectively. **We hope that this summary will inspire and encourage decision-makers to implement for inclusive and participatory decision- and policy-making processes.**

Groups 1 & 2: What are the key challenges adolescent girls and decision-makers face when engaging in participatory accountability processes? Where do things 'get stuck'? What needs to change within the political systems and structures we have to enable girl and youth-led accountability processes and mechanisms?

Knowledge, information, and capacity: There is a lack of knowledge and transparency when it comes to formal decision-making and accountability processes. Adolescent girls are experiencing difficulties in accessing information and stakeholders, as well as evidence and data. Holding decision-makers, especially governments, to account is thus only possible with the right insider knowledge. Capacity strengthening for both adolescent girls and decision-makers, as well as accessible communication mechanisms that could bridge the gap, are often missing.

Inclusion: Better processes are required to ensure that adolescent girls in all their diversity are included in policy-making conversations. This may require additional capacity strengthening opportunities and targeted support, but would ensure that girls' voices a part of any conversation that concerns them. Creating alternative, creative, and potentially compulsory mechanism and methods for voicing girls' wants and needs could transform traditional, inaccessible engagement formats and foster a more open and energetic dialogue.

Systems and processes: Many policy processes are inherently inaccessible to adolescent girls due to unrealistic, difficult participation requirements, excessive use of jargon and technical language, lack of translation, and lack of a central information and coordination platform. Girls with disabilities are particularly hard hit by these barriers. It is often tricky to find out who is the person or department in charge, and financial or non-financial support to participate is often non-existent. Additionally, bureaucracy makes it difficult for governments to facilitate open and transparent youth engagement opportunities. Power-holders should establish diverse and accessible accountability mechanisms and fulfil their responsibilities in monitoring their progress. Public participation, especially of adolescent girls, should be fostered and enabled by design.

Representation: Increasing women's representation in policy-making positions, platforms, offices, and processes would lead to more visibility and support for girls' and women's rights issues, as well as allies with lived experience, to champion accountability for adolescent girls and ensure commitments made for them are implemented.

Risk: Demanding accountability from stakeholders often comes at personal risk for adolescent girls – they might face backlash from their family and/or community, and they will be exposed as an activist in political environments that are not always interested in meaningful and – most importantly – safe dialogue and exchange. Particularly in politically instable spaces, such as occupied territories, this creates an extreme and challenging environment for adolescent girls.

Political will vs. expectations: Unless adolescent girls shout about issues concerning them, there seems to be a lack of commitment and strong allies to support their cause. Often, girls are not taken seriously and belittled for not adding value, whilst at the same time, lived experience is not regarded as sufficient, and expectation from decision-makers towards adolescent girls are high and unrealistic. Above all, it requires political will, stamina, and perseverance to overcome obstacles and barriers, and there is an increasing need for strong allies within political spaces who can make changes and contribute by transforming the political system from within.

Groups 3 & 4: What role do the different stakeholders play in participatory accountability processes? Where can we find agency, where should we place responsibility? What practical ideas/recommendations/projects already exist, and what does 'good' accountability for adolescent girls and young women actually look like?

Adolescent girls and young women are already on the forefront of demanding accountability at the community and national level. There are plenty of examples of youth-led accountability processes and movement building. More needs to be done to amplify best practices and have their voices (and recommendations) heard. Some examples were presented to you by the speakers of this event, other suggestions from the break-out groups are summarised on the next page:

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Community actors, such as parents, caregivers, and community leaders, should all encourage and enable adolescent girls and young women to be politically active if they wish. Adolescent girls and young women need strong allies as well as emotional and psychological support – this starts within their own families and communities.

Formal education should firmly include education on children's and girls' rights in curriculums, and teachers should encourage and support adolescent girls and young people to participate in extracurricular activities relating to girl leadership and political engagement. Examples such as girls' clubs and school clubs focussing on gender equality were highlighted.

Civil Society Organisations and INGOs hold a specific double role of (1) holding decision makers to account themselves, and (2) supporting adolescent girls in their own efforts. Organisations should ensure that their own systems, processes, and structures reflect what they advocate for, and invest in meaningful participation and engagement. Organisations can do more to share evidence and resources, and must ensure adolescent girls are included in program conception, design, implementation, and evaluation. There are many ways in which some organisations work together with girls – from community-led activism, to global-level advocacy, but more organisations should follow suit.

Media, academia, and public-serving organisations were identified as stakeholders with the potential for holding power in terms of what is being published as public knowledge. Media especially should ensure factual and accurate reporting and verification of government claims, to better support the activism of adolescent girls and young women. Academia should ensure that their evidence is accessible and support young activists in their work. A special shout out was given to media influencers and bloggers who often shape public opinion, especially that of young people, and who should use the influencing power to support and amplify girls' voices and rights.

Donors and decision-makers, policy makers, governments: ultimately, the responsibility for delivering commitments lies with those who made them in the first place. Besides actively removing obstacles, donors and governments must play a pro-active role in engaging with adolescent girls and young women. Sustainable systems change can and only will happen when those with decision-making power decide to transform from within. Examples of what 'good' could look like include participatory and inclusive accountability frameworks; funding beyond engagement; accessible, transparent, simplified information and processes; access to resources and (non-)financial support; mandatory, youth-friendly reporting; joining forces across countries to advance girls' rights on the international stage; dedicated mechanisms to include girls in decision-making, such as advisory boards, focus groups, or girl ambassadors roles; efforts for inclusion of girls in all their diversities, especially those with disabilities; and – most importantly – creating space for adolescent girls to lead, and trust and support them to do so in their own right.

Summary

Adolescent girls and young women challenge power-holders in their communities and countries to do better every day, around the globe. Yet, their participation in policy-making processes is often tokenistic, and at worst non-existent. **If decision-makers are serious about designing policies and interventions that have lasting and sustainable impact, they must ensure that adolescent girls and young women are at the centre of the development process – and engaged in a meaningful and participatory way.** Whilst young activists will continue to claim their rights, it is up to power-holders to transform exclusive systems from within so that power-sharing becomes a reality and engagement for young people is done by design.

AGIP and its members and partners will continue to advocate for power to be shifted to adolescent girls beyond WD2023 – and we hope you will join us!

Please use the outcomes of this summary report to advance adolescent girls' access to decision-making spaces, to step into a supportive and empowering ally role, and to advance the changes our current political systems so desperately needs. current political systems so desperately needs. Thank you for being a part of our event – let's make sure we don't stop here!

This event was co-created with Warindi and Ishanvi, adolescent and youth leaders in their own right, and Amref and AGIP colleagues.



ELIZABETH WARINDI
Akili Dada



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WD Young Leader

Co hosts:



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