

EXPLAINER

# Reinforcing Women's Economic Empowerment through Meaningful Youth Engagement



Programs that promote young women's economic empowerment need to look at the way both gender and age affect their experiences and opportunities. Photo credit: ADB.

*Why does meaningful youth engagement matter in promoting young women's economic empowerment, and how do we promote this in our work?*

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## Introduction

Promoting women's economic empowerment is a strategic operational priority of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and an important aspect of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (especially SDG 5). By 2030, ADB aims to support quality jobs-generation and higher value-added entrepreneurship opportunities for women as a way of narrowing gender gaps in the world of work.

Women's economic empowerment refers to the "ability of women to enjoy their right to control and benefit from the resources, assets, income, and their own time, and to manage risk and improve their economic status and well-being." [1] As a keystone to the realization of women's rights and gender equality, it includes "women's ability to participate equally in existing markets; their access to and control over productive resources; access to decent work control over their own time, lives and bodies; and

increased voice, agency and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels from the household to international institutions.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Empowerment, at its core, is also essentially a process of “transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups”<sup>[3]</sup> and doing so involves treating individuals as decision makers and equal-value stakeholders, rather than passive beneficiaries of program interventions. This is in line with SDG 5’s transformative agenda, which increasingly emphasizes transformative approaches rather than standard gender mainstreaming interventions, especially in six areas: <sup>[4]</sup>

- Eliminating violence against women and girls,
- Reducing and rebalancing unpaid care and domestic work,
- Ensuring women’s participation in decision-making and leadership,
- Ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights,
- Undertaking reforms to ensure women’s access to economic and productive resources and information and communication technology, and
- Supporting legal or institutional reforms for protecting women’s rights and changing gendered social norms.

## Why Meaningful Youth Engagement?

Issues surrounding women’s economic empowerment are particularly complex and driven at their roots by deeply entrenched gendered norms. Expectations about how women and men should behave and what their roles are in the household, in communities, and in the public sphere influence the decisions and the opportunities that are made available to them—including in education, training, and work. Intersectional factors, such as age, ethnicity, disability, and class, around which “people’s lives are structured,” further shape their prescribed roles, expectations, and opportunities. <sup>[5]</sup>

Age is a particularly important factor to consider when developing programs for young women, as they not only grapple with restrictions imposed on young people in general but also deal with gender-based discrimination. For example, perceptions of youth “as incapable of managing finances, starting businesses, or making decisions” overlap with gendered expectations about who controls the income when young women eventually marry, resulting in the lack of family support for young women-led businesses.<sup>[6]</sup> Thus, to promote young women’s economic empowerment, programs need to understand and respond to the way both gender and age (among other intersectional factors) determine their experiences and opportunities as well as their relations with other actors, especially powerholders.

The empowerment of young women closely links to their meaningful engagement in decisions affecting their lives as engagement reinforces empowerment. <sup>[7]</sup> Meaningful youth engagement, especially in a youth employment program, occurs when “under enabling conditions, youth representatives actively participate throughout the program life cycle and enter into youth–adult partnerships that empower youth and may contribute to positive and long-lasting labor market outcomes.” <sup>[8]</sup>

The definition of meaningful youth engagement embodies five pillars that help improve the condition and status of young women in society by shifting their participation from tokenistic and instrumentalist forms

toward more inclusive, collaborative, shared-value relationships, where they are treated as experts of their own experiences, agents of change, and as equal partners. Programs that meaningfully engage young women entails harnessing their potential as leaders and decision makers, who can co-develop and implement programs that address their needs. This contributes to their empowerment, which in both gender and youth studies, results in “the acquisition of power in order to accede or contribute to desired change.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Besides its conceptual linkages with empowerment, meaningful youth engagement practices can contribute to development, especially the delivery of quality programs for young women. Programs aiming to encourage the participation of young women in vocational training opportunities can benefit from mobilizing young people, especially women, in behavioral change activities and intergenerational dialogues on crucial economic empowerment issues, including positive gender norms related to the world of work. For example, to encourage young women to take up nontraditional training courses and jobs in India, the Saksham program engaged young women and young men in India to lead activities targeting parents, communities, and employers to promote gender equality and economic empowerment as a precursor of conventional employment program interventions.<sup>[10]</sup> Youth-led campaigns, in addition to market-relevant skills, were essential to ensuring over 10,000 young people—at least 60% young women—transitioned to jobs in the information technology, hospitality, and retail sectors. While the project still encountered challenges in placing young women in nontraditional jobs, graduates nevertheless accessed entry-level jobs in cash and front office management and as sales officers, data entry operators, floor office executives, and data processors.<sup>[11]</sup>

With over 2 billion individuals under the age of 30 living in the region (54% of the global youth population), Asia and the Pacific can potentially reap the benefits of having favorable demographics that correlate with strong economic development and progress. This is contingent on the ability of countries to offer quality jobs and maximize workers’ productivity. As approximately 50% of the region’s youth population are women, many of them living in low and lower middle-income countries, pursuing innovative ways, such as the integration of meaningful youth engagement practices into youth economic empowerment programs, will be crucial.

## Strategies to Promote Meaningful Youth Engagement

Practitioners keen on leveraging the contributions of this approach in their programs can begin with the following strategies:

- Engage young women-led and -focused organizations who represent the program’s target population to ensure their inputs reflect the interests and concerns of intended beneficiaries.
- In program design, make sure to address needs shaped by young women’s intersecting identities and acknowledge that individuals experience differentiated forms of exclusion and discrimination.
- Mobilize young women *and* young men to address gender norms and stereotypes about their participation in the world of work, including in the promotion of positive masculinities.
- Involve young women in providing inputs, implementing activities, and monitoring and evaluating the success of the program.

- Partner with youth organizations and networks led by young women, and provide sufficient resources and support (e.g., capacity building, registration, financial and technical resources).
- Encourage collaboration—both across generations and among generations—in the project team as well as with community stakeholders and decision makers.
- Provide young women ample opportunities to directly speak with decision makers about their concerns, and make sure that there is an enabling environment for them to actively participate and express their voice.

Work with youth partners in monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning activities, especially in measuring meaningful youth engagement in programs and assessing its contribution to intended outcomes.

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## Resources

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### Chris Morris

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Recognizing mobilizing young people for economic and social progress will be instrumental to the region's pathways to shared prosperity, he led the establishment of ADB's Youth for Asia (YfA) initiative in 2013. YfA is the first dedicated unit among international finance institutions (IFI) with the explicit goal of fully embedding youth-led activities within its operations. A British citizen, he is a civil engineer who holds an MSc degree in Irrigation Engineering from the University of Southampton.



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### Iris Caluag

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Iris has been leading policy advocacy on women's economic empowerment, youth employment, and meaningful youth engagement in the Asia–Pacific region. She has managed regional initiatives on young women's economic empowerment that involved research, capacity building, and stakeholder engagement. She now supports the Asian Development Bank's Youth for Asia in promoting meaningful youth engagement in ADB operations.



### Asian Development Bank (ADB)

The Asian Development Bank is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members—49 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.



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