MEANINGFUL AND INCLUSIVE YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT (MIYPE) IN RESEARCH:

INSIGHTS FROM THE POWER TO YOU(TH) CENTRAL OPERATIONAL RESEARCH IN GHANA
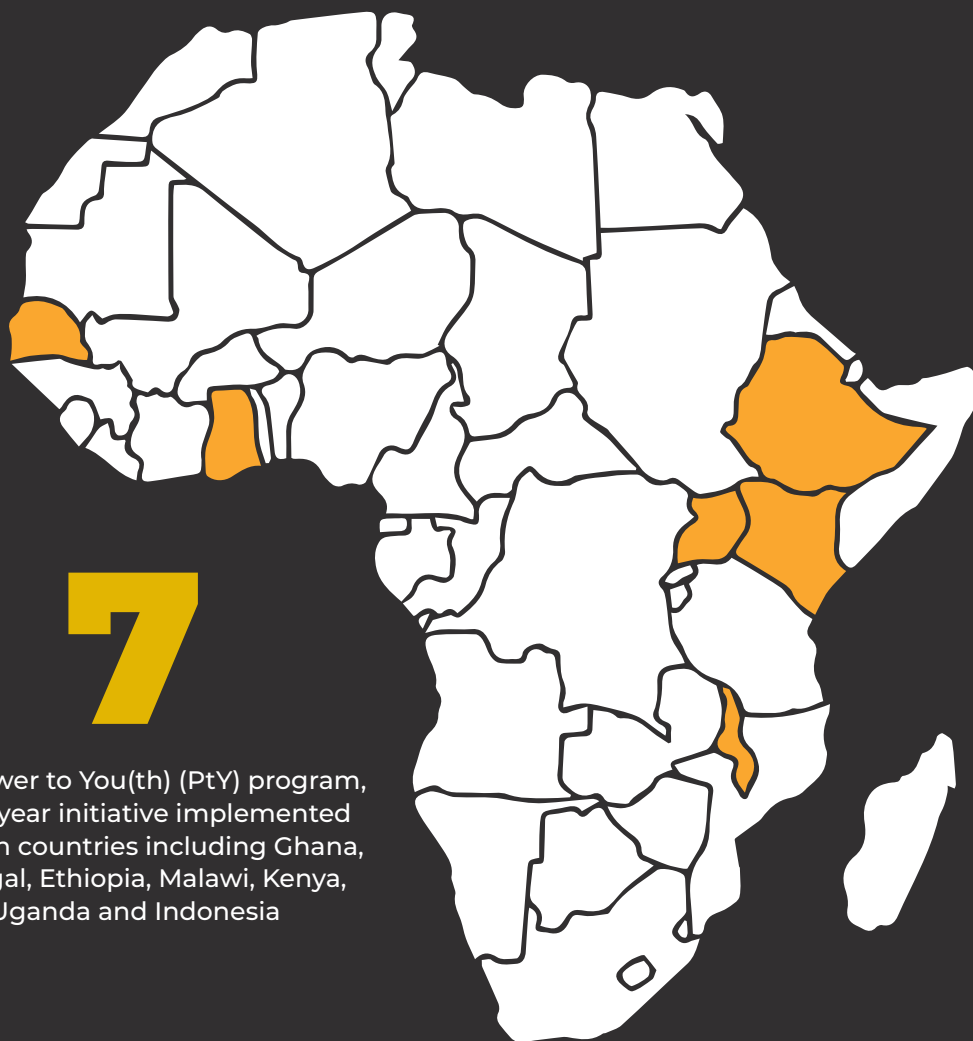
LEARNING BRIEF

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The Power to You(th) (PtY) program, a five-year initiative implemented in seven countries including Ghana, Senegal, Ethiopia, Malawi, Kenya, Uganda and Indonesia

Background

The Power to You(th) (PtY) program, a five-year initiative implemented in seven countries including Ghana, Senegal, Ethiopia, Malawi, Kenya, Uganda and Indonesia, seeks to empower adolescent girls and young women to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Led by Norsaac and implemented with the Ghana SRHR Alliance for Young People, and Songtaba, PtY in Ghana seeks to address three key issues: harmful practices, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and unintended pregnancies.

Central to PtY is the principle of Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Participation and Engagement (MIYPE), which ensures that young people, especially girls, are not solely beneficiaries but active stakeholders in shaping, implementing, and evaluating the program.

The Central Operational Research (COR) was introduced to deepen youth-led learning and improve programmatic outcomes. The COR aims to enhance decision-making through data-driven insights, with young people leading research on issues affecting them. It was also designed to assess progress and improve PtY's operational strategies while strengthening the inclusion of youth voices. In this context, the Ghana COR study focused on "Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV)," an emerging but under-researched issue that disproportionately affects adolescent girls and young women (AGYW). While digital technologies offer new opportunities, they also expose youth—especially AGYW—to online harms such as harassment, cyberstalking, and the non-consensual sharing of images. Given PtY's focus on empowering young people to challenge harmful social norms and advocate for their rights, understanding and addressing TFGBV is essential to achieving meaningful gender equality and youth empowerment in digital spaces.

Youth Leadership in Research:
Composition and Selection

The COR team included four youth researchers (YRs) Two males and two females, from across the three consortium partners (Norsaac, Ghana SRHR Alliance, and Songtaba). These young people were nominated through a participatory process that considered their engagement with PtY as youth SRHR advocates and active roles in their respective networks.

This structure ensured gender balance, representation, and alignment with the lived realities of the communities involved.

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Approach and **Coordination**

The COR was coordinated through strong collaboration between Rutgers, a Dutch center of expertise on SRHR and the overall coordinator of the COR across participating countries, Norsaac, youth researchers, and a consulting team. Initial virtual and physical meetings provided training on research methodologies, TFGBV, and tool development. While early youth engagement was slow due to unclear expectations of the young people's participation by the consultants, subsequent structured follow-ups and engagements bridged these gaps.

Youth Researchers actively participated in the research process through:

- Participating in in-person workshops on the research process, research techniques and methodologies.

- Review of literature on TFGBV.

- Reviewing and providing input on draft reports.

- Developing recommendations based on research findings to ensure follow-up actions speak to young people's realities and PtY's programmatic effectiveness.

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Key Takeaways and Insights from MIYPE **Implementation**

Best Practices

1. Value of Youth Voices:

Youth researchers brought fresh, experience-based perspectives that grounded the research in real community dynamics and young people's lived experiences. The value of our contributions ensured ownership of the report.

2. Build Competencies through Consistent Training:

Step-by-step, regular training significantly improved the youth researchers' ability to understand and contribute to research processes. During the training sessions, the consultants introduced the youth researchers to research methodologies, the use of databases, analytical tools, and ethical considerations. Repeated and regular training improved our confidence, skills and competencies.

3. Stay Connected to Stay Effective:

Communication through regular virtual check-ins, calls, and follow-ups helped keep everyone aligned and engaged. Early on, there was a lack of consistent communication and coordination, which led to misunderstandings, delays, and reduced motivation among Youth Researchers. This highlighted the need for more frequent and structured meetings to ensure that all parties were aligned on project objectives and progress. Subsequently, after identifying the gaps and adopting regular conference calls, texts, and detailed follow-up meetings, engagement between the consultants and youth researchers was greatly improved.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Effective *Youth Engagement in Research*

1 Plan Schedules Jointly with Flexibility

Frequent changes in schedules, especially caused by external commitments of consultants, disrupted planned sessions with Youth Researchers. This often dampened morale and reduced motivation, hindering effective participation. Ensuring that schedules are jointly planned, with built-in flexibility, would help maintain momentum and support effective youth engagement.

2 Provide Realistic Timelines for Research

Despite the relevance and interest in the topic, the research period was short, putting undue pressure on Youth Researchers to meet tight deadlines, which sometimes affected the quality of engagement and output. Giving the Youth Researchers and the consulting team more time to work together helps them work more effectively. Rushing research limits depth. More time supports thoughtful data gathering and richer analysis.

3 Ensure Consultants Have a Clear Understanding of MIYPE Principles

A lack of sufficient knowledge in Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Participation and Engagement (MIYPE) among consultants led to communication gaps and weakened partnerships. This initially limited the level of involvement and contribution of Youth Researchers. Ensuring that consultants are selected based on their understanding of and commitment to MIYPE would strengthen collaboration and reduce misunderstandings.

4 Clearly Define Roles and Responsibilities

It is essential to establish clearly defined roles and expectations for all members of the research team early in the process. This prevents confusion, fosters accountability, and ensures that everyone understands their responsibilities and contributions throughout the research.

5 Involve Youth in Research Design from the Start

Involving Youth Researchers in the co-creation of research strategies from the beginning enhances their ownership and ensures that their perspectives shape the direction of the study. This kind of early involvement is a core principle of meaningful participation and should be embedded from the start.

6 Invest in continuous Capacity Building for Youth Researchers

Providing regular training and mentorship throughout the research process helps Youth Researchers develop their skills and confidence over time. One-off trainings are not sufficient. Instead, continuous capacity-building efforts will empower youth to take full ownership of the work and contribute more effectively.

7 Provide Adequate Tools and Resources

Youth Researchers lacked essential tools such as laptops, stable internet access, and key resource materials. This resource gap led to delays in task completion and hindered full participation. Ensuring that young people have the necessary tools and logistics through the provision of support, such as data and devices, is essential to enable equitable participation.

8 Establish Regular Check-ins and Feedback Loops

Creating space for ongoing reflection, feedback, and adaptation is key to responsive and inclusive research processes. Regular check-ins help identify and address challenges early, ensuring that support remains relevant and that youth voices continue to shape the process.

9 Conduct Periodic Evaluations of Youth Engagement

Conducting regular evaluations, such as surveys or focus group discussions, helps assess whether youth engagement efforts are meeting their intended goals. These evaluations should be led by the implementing team and used to improve inclusion, equity, and the overall impact of youth participation.

Why Young People Should Be *Co-Researchers*

The experience of Meaningful and Inclusive Youth Participation (MIYP) in the COR clearly demonstrated the value of involving young people not just as subjects, but as co-researchers. When young people actively participate in every stage of the research process, from design and data collection to analysis and dissemination, the findings become more reflective of their lived realities. This leads to research that is not only more accurate and nuanced, but also more relevant and actionable for the communities it is meant to serve.

In turn, this relevance strengthens the power of youth-led advocacy. When young people are the ones generating the evidence, they are better equipped to use it to influence change. Their ability to link data to their own experiences lends authenticity and credibility to their advocacy, making it more compelling to policymakers, practitioners, and peers alike. Research becomes a tool not only for understanding issues, but for actively transforming them, by those most affected.

Crucially, this is not just a matter of improving research outcomes or enhancing advocacy strategies. At its core, youth participation is a matter of rights. Young people have the right to be meaningfully involved in shaping responses to the issues that impact their lives. Participation in research is one powerful way to realize this right. It shifts power, challenges traditional hierarchies, and promotes accountability by centering youth voices in decision-making processes. When young people are trusted, supported, and included as equals in research, it reinforces their agency and opens up pathways for lasting, youth-led social change.

This approach was not only transformative for the young people involved, it also shifted the perspective of those working alongside them. As Professor Eliasu Mumuni, the lead consultant, reflected:

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This project stands out for its unique and innovative approach as the lead consultant. Unlike traditional models, we, as consultants, were engaged to lead the research and train and mentor these Youth Researchers on the technical and practical aspects of understanding Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) through research. This dual role of engagement and capacity-building marks a refreshing departure from standard practice and offers renewed hope for youth involvement in addressing complex social issues such as TFGBV.

The Youth Researchers were guided through the research process — from field methodology and literature review techniques to proper citation and referencing, using digital tools and databases, ethical considerations, responding to feedback, and drafting actionable recommendations and policy briefs. The hands-on training equipped them with both academic and advocacy-oriented research skills. What stood out most was the level of commitment and enthusiasm demonstrated by the youth. Their eagerness to understand and confront the emerging issue of TFGBV translated into meaningful participation, resulting in a strong bridge between research practice and policy influence. This innovative model, led by NORSAAC and Rutgers, not only empowered young researchers but also showed the potential of participatory learning in fostering youth-led social change.........

PROF ELIASU MUMUNI

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This was echoed by Rumanatu Jibrila, Youth Empowerment Manager at NORSAAC, who emphasised the importance of both inclusion and trust:

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Youth Participation in issues that affect them is a matter of right. Which is why it was exciting to see that the COR had not just immensed these young people in the process but also valued their contributions and insights. This shows that with the right guidance and mentorship, young people can do anything"...

RUMANATU JIBLRILA
YOUTH EMPOWERMENT MANAGER,
NORSAAC

And from the perspective of youth leadership itself, Halimatu Sadia Alhassan, who coordinated the COR process, shared:

> "Based on my experience coordinating the COR process as a young person, I initially feared that youth participation would not be genuinely felt, that our involvement might be minimal or only symbolic. But as the process unfolded, it was inspiring to witness young people take full ownership of the research. We led boldly, asked the right questions, and brought fresh, grounded perspectives to the work. The 'for youth, by youth' approach wasn't just a symbolic gesture; it was a demonstration of what meaningful youth leadership looks like in action. It proved that when young people are trusted with responsibility and equipped with the right tools, we can drive real change and produce insights that are grounded, relevant, and transformative".

HALIMATU SADIA ALHASSAN

Together, these reflections reinforce what the project demonstrated in practice: that meaningful youth participation in research is not only beneficial, it is necessary. When young people are trusted, supported, and included as equals in research, the results are more impactful, the process more empowering, and the outcomes more sustainable.

Youth Researchers' Experiences in the COR Process

The following testimonies from Youth Researchers involved in the COR process illustrate firsthand the impact of meaningful youth participation and underscore the value and rights of youth as co-researchers.

> *As a youth advocate, the COR experience not only improved my knowledge on MIYPE and research skills, it also gave an opportunity to learn and appreciate the extent and harmful effects of TFGBV on people's lives, and how young people and stakeholders can work together to address the issue, and provide assistance to survivors".*
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> **AHMED WUMPINI JAJA**

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"I developed a deeper understanding of TFGBV and its impact . I also gained some experience in data extraction, how to review articles and how to identify themes from such articles".

FEIDIA ABDUL-RAHIM

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"The COR process introduced me to the emerging issues of TFGBV and strengthened my understanding of how to meaningfully integrate youth participation into research through the MIYPE framework. Additionally, it has deepened my knowledge of research tools and transformed how I approach advocacy. I now rely more on data and verifiable information to guide conversations and influence change.".

ABDULLAH HABIB MOHAMMED

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"Going through the research process taught me a lot—I now understand the difference between simply sharing findings and making sure they create impact. I've learned how to craft practical recommendations by linking them to both the research goals and results, respond to review comments to improve clarity and quality, and use tools like Mendeley to manage references. Most importantly, I gained a deeper understanding of TFGBV and its many forms, like cyberbullying, stalking, sexual harassment, and hate speech".

LATIFATU BASHIRU

Conclusion

The COR experience under PtY Ghana demonstrated that when youth are equipped, supported, and empowered, they contribute meaningfully to research and programmatic learning. By building on these lessons, MIYPE can be further institutionalized in research across programs, ensuring that young people continue to drive transformative change in their communities .