

## Commentary

## Empowering Youth to Build the Families They Want: Opportunities and Challenges

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World Population Day, observed annually on July 11, focuses global attention on the intricate connections between population trends and sustainable development. Established by the United Nations Development Programme in 1989 and formally recognized by the UN General Assembly, its inaugural observance on July 11, 1990, spanned over 90 countries (1–2). This observance fosters dialogue on critical population issues, ranging from reproductive health and gender equality to the environmental sustainability.

For the 36th World Population Day in 2025, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has set the theme as “Empowering young people to create the families they want in a fair and hopeful world” (3), which underscores the pivotal role of youth in shaping demographic futures and affirms their fundamental right to reproductive autonomy. It serves as a call to action for governments, institutions, and societies to equip young people with the necessary tools, resources, and supportive environments, enabling them to make informed decisions about their lives and families.

While individuals aged 15–24 are defined as youth (4), persons between ages of 10 and 24 are usually considered young people (5). Comprising approximately 2 billion individuals, nearly a quarter of the global population, today’s generation of young people is predominantly concentrated in low- and middle-income countries (6). These young people are transitioning into adulthood amidst profound economic, social, and environmental shifts. Their collective potential to drive national development and global progress, often termed the “demographic dividend,” is contingent upon strategic investments in health, education, employment, and gender equality.

Despite this immense potential, many young people encounter significant obstacles in achieving their reproductive aspirations. Recent UNFPA research reveals that one in five individuals across 14 countries reports having fewer children than desired, attributing this to economic insecurity, job instability, housing unaffordability, gender inequality, and pervasive global uncertainties (7). The UN Secretary-General’s 2025 message emphasizes that while youth possess vast

potential, they frequently lack the conducive conditions required for them to flourish (3). True youth empowerment necessitates the dismantling of structural constraints that impede their ability to build the families they envision.

These barriers are not theoretical. Rather, they manifest in concrete, everyday realities that affect how young people live, grow, and plan for their futures. To better understand their needs, it is important to look more closely at the conditions that shape their choices and opportunities.

Access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services remains a critical unmet need, especially for adolescent girls. Reproductive autonomy is fundamentally rooted in access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services. While adolescent birth rates have seen a substantial decline, from 73 to 38 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19 since the 1990s, an estimated 12 million adolescent girls are still projected to give birth in 2025 (5). A significant number of these young individuals lack access to modern contraception, and tragically, maternal complications remain a leading cause of death among adolescent girls (8). Adolescent-responsive health systems to provide confidential counseling and respectful care are essential to reduce these risks and uphold reproductive autonomy.

Quality education is a powerful enabler of youth empowerment, yet many still lack access, particularly girls in low- and middle-income countries. Education helps delay early marriage and childbirth, enhances health outcomes, supports climate resilience, and promotes economic independence. Educated girls are more likely to make informed reproductive decisions and become active participants in public life. However, progress has stalled in many regions, leaving millions without the tools to build empowered futures (9).

Gender inequality continues to undermine young women’s agency in family formation. Across many societies, girls are denied decision-making power regarding marriage, sexuality, and childbirth (10). Discriminatory laws and norms limit their leadership and economic participation. Achieving Sustainable

Development Goal 5 that focuses on gender equality and reproductive rights is essential to removing these barriers and enabling equitable opportunities for all (11).

Economic insecurity significantly hampers young people's ability to form families on their own terms. Precarious jobs, high living costs, and limited access to housing and childcare delay or derail family planning (12). Evidence shows that stable employment, entrepreneurship support, and robust social protections empower youth to pursue their desired family lives with confidence and security.

Digital inclusion and climate resilience are critical pillars of youth empowerment. However, millions of young people, especially in low-income, rural, or marginalized settings, lack access to the Internet, digital devices, and basic digital literacy, excluding them from vital educational and economic opportunities (13). At the same time, the worsening climate crisis threatens their health, livelihoods, and educational continuity. Equipping youth with digital access, green skills, and climate literacy, while aligning gender-responsive climate action with reproductive health and leadership programs, is essential to building more secure and equitable futures (14).

Achieving the ambitious 2025 vision necessitates coordinated, multi-sectoral efforts that empower young people to create the families they want and lead fulfilling lives in a fair and hopeful world. First, health and education systems must undergo comprehensive reform to be truly youth-responsive. Health services should be accessible, respectful, and confidential, with trained personnel and flexible hours to meet the diverse needs of adolescents and young adults. Simultaneously, education must extend beyond academic instruction to incorporate life skills, gender equality, and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) education. Integrating SRHR into national curricula and delivering it effectively across all settings is essential for ensuring that young people are equipped to make informed choices.

Second, economic empowerment must be strengthened through labor market policies that promote youth employment and entrepreneurship by ensuring fair wages, skills development, and protections against exploitation. At the same time, comprehensive social protection systems, including childcare services, paid parental leave, and affordable housing, are vital to easing the financial and logistical burdens of parenthood, thereby making family formation more viable and appealing for young individuals. Special attention must be paid to marginalized groups, such as rural youth, girls, youth

with disabilities, and those impacted by conflict or displacement, ensuring that investments and policies reach those most in need.

Third, digital inclusion must be prioritized to ensure that all young people can access and benefit from the opportunities offered by technology. Expanding digital infrastructure and ensuring access to affordable internet and devices can support youth engagement in education, health, employment, and civic life. However, this must be accompanied by targeted efforts to bridge persistent gender and rural-urban gaps in digital access and literacy, so that digital transformation is inclusive and equitable.

Fourth, legal and cultural environments must be transformed to uphold youth rights and agency. Restrictive laws and harmful social norms must be addressed through legal reform, public education campaigns, and strong youth-led advocacy. Enabling young people to participate meaningfully in policymaking processes not only upholds democratic principles but also improves the effectiveness and legitimacy of resulting policies.

Fifth, greater global solidarity is essential to ensure adequate resources for youth-centered development, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Donors, multilateral institutions, and international partners must scale up investments in reproductive health, education, climate resilience, and digital access. Crucially, all youth policies and programs must be rooted in a rights-based approach. As UNFPA emphasizes, the challenge is not declining fertility itself, but the erosion of reproductive choice (7). Efforts must focus on expanding options rather than applying pressure, ensuring that demographic targets never compromise individual autonomy or equity.

Finally, robust accountability mechanisms and sustained political commitment are needed to ensure progress. This includes investing in strong data systems with clear indicators such as adolescent birth rates, contraceptive coverage, gender parity in education, youth employment, digital access, and civic participation. Tools like the Young People's Empowerment Index (YPEI) can offer multidimensional insights (15). Youth must also be engaged in monitoring processes through national councils, digital feedback platforms, and community initiatives. Long-term government commitment to inclusive financing and global partnerships, such as South-South cooperation, will be key to scaling effective and innovative solutions.

In summary, the 2025 theme of the World Population Day presents a vital and timely opportunity: to unequivocally center youth in the

global pursuit of reproductive rights, sustainable development, and overarching global equity. Empowering young people to create the families they desire is not merely an aspirational goal; it is an indispensable prerequisite for realizing demographic dividends, advancing fundamental human rights, and ultimately achieving a just, inclusive, and climate-resilient world. In alignment with this vision, the National Health Commission of China has set the theme of the 36th World Population Day in China as “Happy beginning with getting married and having children, love and support accompany each other” (16), highlighting marriage and childbirth support policies and service initiatives. This reflects a growing policy emphasis on supporting family formation through comprehensive, people-centered approaches. Taken together, the profound vision of the 2025 theme demands more than isolated sectoral reforms. It necessitates the establishment of inclusive systems that systematically dismantle barriers, unequivocally affirm agency, and strategically invest in futures shaped and led by youth. With unwavering political will, transformative cultural shifts, and concerted international cooperation, we possess the collective capacity to co-create a world where every young person, particularly girls, can shape their lives and families with unbridled freedom, inherent dignity, and enduring hope.

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