

Youth civic engagement in the Global South in a time of growing political fragmentation

Introduction

Traditional understandings of democratic governance and citizenship that centre on the relationship between states and citizens are being challenged by growing political fragmentation, wherein politics becomes more partisan, power becomes increasingly fractured, and states are unable to deliver effective governance (Pildes 2021). Alongside intensified human mobility that is leading to increasingly pluralistic societies, and the growth of the global virtual ecosystem, political fragmentation is being driven by global crises including climate change, pandemics, conflict, and increasing nationalist and antidemocratic sentiments and mobilisation (Bayer et al 2021). Anger with the failure of states to mitigate the harmful impacts of these processes is, in turn, driving further fragmentation, evident in waves of protest movements worldwide that are almost universally characterised by a distrust in formal political institutions (Krastev 2014; Grande and Saldivia Gonzatti 2025). Much of this mobilisation has been instigated by young people, whose individual political identities and civic practices have been formed alongside the emergence of these dynamics.

While research on and theorisation of youth civic participation has historically focused on the experiences of young people in democracies of the Global North, a growing body of work explores the political engagement and citizenship practices of young people in the Global South, where 85% of the world's adolescents and youth live. This work has shown that historic marginalisation and material poverty are central to political subjectification and agency in global majority contexts, and that political fragmentation unfolds in ways that are interconnected with context-specific inequalities (Salemink et al 2018; Cooper et al 2019; Prendergast et al 2021; Swartz et al 2021; Wood 2023; Lamichhane and Dhakal 2024; Pincock et al 2024; Onodera et al 2025; Orsini and Duque 2025). However, this emerging Southern research agenda has largely focused on older youth and on young men, with less attention to how social inequalities during adolescence – including gender, but also ethnicity in multi-ethnic contexts, and legal status in contexts affected by forced displacement – may influence emergent opportunities for civic participation, leadership, and engagement in democratic processes.

Attending to these knowledge gaps is essential for improving our understanding of young people's political subjectivity and evolving citizenship practices, and their relationship to democracy, in Global South contexts. This paper offers a socio-ecological and intersectional conceptual framework informed by the principle of 'evolving capacities' to connect changes over the life course in how young people engage with politics (Lansdown 2005; Lister 2007), and the stratification of civic engagement by existing inequalities, with a critical understanding of the multiple intersecting influences that shape young lives in the Global South. It draws on case studies from research undertaken by the longitudinal mixed-methods Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) study (2016–2026) in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Jordan – contexts heavily shaped by political unrest and fragmentation over the past decade – to explore how gender, inter-ethnic, and refugee–host inequalities play out in different socio-ecological spaces in ways that shape young people's political identification and stratify their civic engagement.

Background: approaches to young people's civic engagement in the Global South

Two strands of thinking tend to frame research on youth politics in the Global South. The first starts with an assumption of a disaffected 'youth bulge' who are disengaged with politics, and thus focuses on what kinds of interventions (often by civil society organisations but also through citizenship education) are effective in addressing participation gaps (see, for example, Iyamu and Obiunu 2005; Rye and Vold 2019; Schulz et al 2025). However, this approach tends to lean on technocratic, decontextualised understandings of civic engagement that are embedded within a Western conceptual lens that do not reflect the realities of civic life around the world. It also fails to take into account inequalities between and within global contexts that shape political orientations and participation opportunities (Williams 2013; Moland 2015; Chua and Sim 2017; Kovalchuk and Rapoport 2020; Wray-Lake and Ballard 2023; Wood 2023). Research has also not explored how gender shapes political socialisation outside of Western contexts, despite evidence of significant global gender gaps, particularly in formal expressions of civic engagement such as voting (see Coffe and Bolzendahl 2011; Isaksson et al 2014; Iyer and Mani 2019; Tambe and Jormfeldt 2025).

A growing field of work, more recent in scope, asserts that young people in the Global South are not at all disengaged politically, but that their opportunities for and expressions of politics exist outside of normative and Western-informed formal modalities such as election campaigning, voting and party affiliations. Research has explored how young people's everyday experiences of navigating precarity in the context of social and economic

shifts – including economic crises, conflict and regime change – informs civic engagement, and how growing digital connectivity is further changing the nature of political participation (Salemink et al 2018; Cooper et al 2019; Orsini and Duque 2025). It often focuses on young people's engagement with online spaces, counter-movements such as boycotts, protests, and other non-mainstream activities as forms of political participation (Prendergast et al 2021; Lamichhane and Dhakal 2024; Onodera et al 2025). Shewly and Gerharz (2025) emphasise that these forms of activism are often digital if not hybrid, are decentralised and fluid, and are grounded within decolonial discourse and emotional registers that speak to the volatility amid which they emerge.

However, this emerging Southern research agenda has largely focused on older youth and young men rather than adolescents; there has been less attention to girls and young women, and less attention to how age, gender and other social inequalities may influence opportunities for civic participation, leadership, and engagement in democratic processes (Pincock et al 2024). Indeed, dominant conceptualisations of how youth collective action emerges overlook the heterogeneity of youth altogether (see, for example, Mannheim and Kecskemeti 1952; Melucci 1996). This is despite a wealth of evidence across diverse Global South contexts showing that gender norms shape adolescents' and young people's voice and decision-making, mobility, agency, and other dimensions and preconditions for political participation in ways that constrain girls' opportunities as they age through adolescence (Mmari et al 2018; Jones et al 2019; Zimmerman et al 2019; Banati et al 2024; Edmonds et al 2024; Pincock et al 2024). In multi-ethnic contexts, participation is also stratified by ethnicity (Birbir and Van Cott 2007; Lemarchand 2021; Ishtiaq et al 2024; Ramasamy 2024); and in contexts affected by forced displacement, refugees are systematically excluded from formal citizenship rights, even when living in host countries for the majority of their lives (Bender 2021).

In Global North contexts, research has observed the ways that social and relational exclusion and policy failings can lead to 'parallel' citizenships for young people, such as participation in armed and gang violence (see Deuchar 2010; van Ngo et al 2017; Virgin 2017). Research on adolescents in the Global South (as opposed to research on youth), however, largely emphasises positive dimensions of civic engagement over a 'dark side' (Fiorina 1999) that includes expressions of citizenship that may be harmful or violent and are rooted in racism, sexism, homophobia, or religious extremism (Abdelzadeh et al 2015; Wray-Lake and Ballard 2023; Setty et al 2024). Indeed, the majority of research on children and younger people's political engagement in the Global South has focused on their participation in climate action (see Nkrumah 2021; Prendergast et al 2021), with other forms of more detrimental political engagement not considered in relation to citizenship.

In recent years, research focused on global North settings has increasingly highlighted the need to consider the ways that increasing digitalisation and growing time spent online by young people is shaping their emergent citizenship. Young people are usually the first to adopt new technologies, and it is essential to take stock and make sense of the ways that the internet and social media may be changing the nature of citizenship practices (Black et al 2022). While the concept of 'digital citizenship' (Mossberger 2007) was proposed as an early means of capturing the ways in which people participate in society through online activities, more recent work has explored the relationship between online and offline citizenship as a 'hybrid' form and understand the implications of these for young people's political identities (Blanch 2016). Building on these ideas, Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat (2025) claim that a new citizenship model of 'expressive citizenship' is being created as a result of this shift, wherein publicly expressing views around current events now constitutes a form of political participation in and of itself.

However, analyses of 'hybrid citizenship' in the global South must accommodate certain differences, especially as online spaces in the global South are not as widely accessible as they are in the global North. They can both be sites of stratified participation, where only the most advantaged young people are able to afford to engage; and sites of 'adverse digital incorporation' (Heeks 2022) wherein the benefits to young people of being online are superseded by the (often hidden) value extraction that takes place in service of maintaining offline inequalities. Hate speech and cyber-racism, which are a major challenge in diverse contexts where political tensions exist over such diversity, present major barriers to the formation of an online civil society that facilitates social cohesion and constructive exchange of views (Siapera et al. 2018; Harris and Johns 2021). While research across global contexts shows that online spaces can facilitate the spread of disinformation and misinformation that further contributes to political fragmentation by undermining trust at all levels, in contexts where digital literacy rates are lower misinformation is likely to spread more quickly – sometimes exacerbating offline violence (Pildes 2022; Haile 2024; Begum and Ali 2025; Pincock et al 2026). However, adolescents' engagement with online spaces in relation to civic engagement in the global South has been the subject of limited critical attention.

Reconceptualising youth civic engagement amid political fragmentation

Addressing these evidence gaps is essential for developing stronger, empirically informed conceptual frameworks for understanding citizenship meanings and practices outside the Global North, where political fragmentation poses a major challenge to justice and democracy. Research on political participation in the Global South draws attention to the need for analysis to be grounded in material realities of deprivation and volatility, and the ways that this informs citizenship as a lived experience that is embodied and intersubjective (Kallio et al 2020; Pincock et al 2024; Shewly and Gerharz 2025). However, this latter dimension of intersubjectivity is often underexplored or poorly understood as a factor shaping citizenship, despite the fundamentally socio-relational nature of participation, belonging, and other practices that constitute political and civic engagement. In this paper, we thus draw on three core concepts – ‘evolving capacities’, a socio-ecological approach, and intersectional theory – to enable insights into the relational and intersubjective nature of young people’s emergent citizenship, and the ways in which these dynamics are shaped by both material conditions and social inequalities.

The principle of ‘evolving capacities’ (Lansdown 2005; UNICEF Innocenti 2026) draws attention to how young people’s networks of relationships within their wider socio-ecological environments (including online) constrain or enable their civic participation – both over an individual’s life course and in relation to broader dynamics of political fragmentation. ‘Evolving capacities’ is a foundational concept within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and refers to how children and young people’s cognitive, physical, social, emotional and moral capacities grow and develop over time (Lansdown 2005; Varadan 2019). These capacities ‘evolve’ across three overlapping dimensions, which are recognised within the Convention: development (including social, biological and neurological changes); emancipation (opportunities, agency and participation); and protection (care and guidance from caregivers and the state in line with age-related needs) (UNICEF Innocenti 2026). Departing from unilinear concepts of development (which presume that capacities expand as a result of individual, biological development), capacities are instead understood as evolving in ways that are non-linear and shaped by structural environments (Johnson and West 2018; UNICEF Innocenti 2026).

With regards to young people’s political subjectivities and citizenship practices, the lens of evolving capacities has primarily been used to nuance interpretation and application of the participation rights of children and young people who are below the age of 18. Work in this area emphasises that excluding young people from decision-making processes on the basis of age-related inexperience and a lack of knowledge produces a self-perpetuating cycle that reduces opportunities for them to gain this experience and knowledge (Lansdown 2009; Hart 2013; Gal and Duramy 2015; Johnson and West 2018; Esteban 2022). While this literature underscores the importance of context, it also calls attention to the role of family relationships in children and adolescents’ evolving capacities as enshrined in Article 5 of the UNCRC, which affirms the primacy of appropriate adult guidance and direction in upholding young people’s rights (Lansdown 2022).

Outside of conceptual analysis, empirical work on the role of caregivers in young people’s evolving capacities in the Global South has not explored its implications for political participation, with research focusing primarily on the tensions between protection and parental authority that Article 5 introduces (Savage-Oyekunle and Nienaber 2015; Chilembelenbe-Seyungu et al 2026). Research in contexts shaped by material poverty nonetheless shows that systemic dynamics such as poverty, inequality, exclusion, violence and discrimination shape life trajectories and opportunities, and undermine young people’s capacities across all dimensions (UNICEF Innocenti 2026). Furthermore, challenging socio-economic conditions undermine and limit young people’s access to the interpersonal and caregiver support that is necessary to scaffold the evolution of their capacities (Lansdown 2009; Benner et al 2016; Sarker et al 2017; Ullrich et al 2022; Badura et al 2024; Braithwaite et al 2024). Alongside an ‘evolving capacities’ lens, this article attends to these relational and structural dimensions of young people’s political and civic engagement through a socio-ecological approach that specifically explores the ways that interconnected micro- and macro-level actors (including family, community, service providers, policy actors as well as the wider governance environment) influence young people’s ability and opportunity to participate on matters that affect them (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1991; Belsky 1980; Gal 2017; Sadownik 2023; Sime et al 2023).

Analyses of civic engagement and political identities in the Global South also overlook the significant variance in citizenship experiences by gender, ethnicity, disability, legal status, sexuality and other points of social difference. As already noted, much of the empirical literature focuses on older, urban male youth, and either treats their experiences as representative of all young people in a given setting or overlooks the dynamics that enable or constrain participation by other groups of young people. Yet it is essential to engage with these differences analytically in order to understand the dynamics and effects of political fragmentation. Intersectional theory

emphasises the multidimensionality of marginalisation experienced by those situated at the ‘intersections’ of oppressed identities (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000; Nash 2008). As such, it offers a means to analytically account for how social inequalities shape civic engagement. Complementing the emphasis of Southern scholarship on citizenship not as a homogenous experience but as one that is constituted through material conditions, an intersectional lens offers an account of citizenship as embodied and differentiated through the axes of difference which in turn shape access to economic, social and political power and status (Yuval-Davis 2007).

Methods

We apply this analytical framework to data on young people’s experiences of voice and agency generated via a decade of longitudinal mixed-methods research in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Jordan by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) study to explore youth civic engagement dynamics. GAGE is a multi-phased panel study with qualitative and quantitative data collection waves following the same adolescents at baseline (2017–2019), midline (2019–2021) and endline (2024–2026) timepoints (see Luckenbill et al., 2025a, 2025b; Seager et al. 2025a, 2025b; Hamory et al 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d for quantitative survey modules). Qualitative research methods for exploring adolescents’ voice and agency included in-depth interviews, paired interviews and focus group discussions on topics including: physical and digital mobility (including access to different online and offline spaces); decision-making around marriage, education, work, leisure activities and friendships; and voice and participation in the family, community and polity, including political affiliations, voting, volunteering and involvement in social movements.

A socio-ecological intersectional framing of evolving capacities means investigating how participation manifests in different spaces and through relationships with others; how citizenship is influenced by such spaces and relationships; and how these change over the life course for different groups of young people. GAGE’s methodological design is informed by this socio-ecological framing. First, young people, their peers, and their caregivers and parents – as well as key stakeholders in young lives such as community and religious leaders, teachers, social workers and government actors – are all part of the GAGE sample. GAGE research also attends to and engages with the broader macro-structural context and conditions in which young people are located, including global, national and local socio-economic and political dynamics, and how these are changing over time in ways that are reshaping transitions into adulthood. Finally, the sample includes young people from displaced and refugee backgrounds, young women who were married as children (below the age of 18), and young people with disabilities, recognising that these social identities intersect to produce specific experiences of disadvantage that are nonetheless often overlooked within the broader literature on adolescence and youth. The quantitative and qualitative samples from which the findings in this paper draw are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of mixed methods research sample with young people from the GAGE endline aged 17-26 years

Bangladesh	Ethiopia	Jordan
• Surveys with 1,369 young people living in Cox’s Bazar district • In-depth qualitative research with 61 young people and 15 caregivers • 40% Bangladeshis living in host communities • 60% Rohingya refugees who arrived starting in 2017 and live in formal camps	• Surveys with 6,673 young people • In-depth qualitative research with 256 young people and 167 caregivers • 62% live in one of three rural areas: South Gondar, Amhara; East Hararghe, Oromia; Hari Rasu, Afar • 38% live in one of three urban locations: Debre Tabor, Amhara; Batu, Oromia; and the chartered city of Dire Dawa	• Surveys with 2,838 young people • In-depth qualitative research with 129 young people and 52 caregivers • 71% are Syrian refugees; most arrived in 2012 or 2013 and live in a mix of host communities, formal refugee camps, and informal tented settlements (ITSs) • 15% Jordanians • 10% Palestinians, nearly all descended from people displaced from Gaza in the 1960s, who are stateless and live in Jerash refugee camp.

Findings are organised by country. For each country, we present mixed-methods endline data to provide insights into young people's civic engagement and political participation, delving into the contextual dynamics that are shaping young people's experiences, with attention to shifting patterns in educational access, expanded use of the internet, and socio-political conditions. In each section, we also explore the role of parental, caregiver and other adults' attitudes and practices in sustaining gender, age, nationality and ethnicity inequalities in adolescent and young people's political participation and civic engagement.

Findings

1. Bangladesh

Young people's perspectives and experiences

In Bangladesh, 71% of young people felt that politics were irrelevant to a person such as themselves – a high proportion, given recent political changes in the country. In 2024, a series of student-led protests against government corruption that began in the capital Dhaka and spread across Bangladesh led to the ousting of the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, after 15 years in power. However, young people expressed mixed perspectives on the 'July Revolution'. Some had been motivated to participate due to the lack of democratic practices in the country. A 16-year-old boy with a vision impairment explained:

I went twice to the student movement demonstrations. The Awami League government took away people's freedom of speech. The youth were protesting for just causes. They didn't accept that the government committed mass killings. There was no democracy in the country. People were tortured. That's why we supported the movement. I was emotionally hurt by all this and went on my own to participate.

A small number of Rohingya young people also spoke positively about the student movements. A 16-year-old boy from a Ukhiya camp noted: *"I was happy. It was good for Muslims. In Bangladesh, students always hold power. It makes us think – if all the Rohingya unite, we can get our country back"*.

However, overall the majority of young people in the sample had not been able to participate in protests, often due to parental concerns that collective action could turn violent (see below). Moreover, more than a quarter (26%) of young Bangladeshis felt that social cohesion had also declined since the 'July Revolution'; young men were particularly likely to feel this way (30% of males, versus 23% of females). A 23-year-old young man from a Ukhiya host community noted: *"Yes I heard about the July Revolution...What was the point of the movement? The country was destroyed...Robberies are increasing due to the fall of the government"*.

While a female prime minister had been in power for a decade and a half prior to expulsion in 2024, nearly two-thirds (64%) of young people agreed with the statement that women who are involved in politics cannot also be good wives and mothers. The quantitative data also showed that Bangladeshi girls (31%) were more likely than boys (19%) to feel that their opportunities to exercise voice and agency had declined since the change in regime. These changes have occurred against a backdrop of limited mobility and decision-making opportunities for girls, especially regarding day-to-day choices; while 69% of adolescent boys had a say over when they left their home, only 45% of girls said they could make this decision. As one 16-year-old adolescent boy explained:

Boys have a bit more freedom compared to girls. For example, we can go wherever we want, whenever we want. There aren't many restrictions from home. But for girls, that's not always possible... I mean we can go to the market, sit at tea stalls and have tea, talk to everyone – girls can't really do that.

Qualitative findings emphasised the need for girls to have support and permission from male family members in all areas of life, and for choices to be made in line with broader norms around behavioural propriety. A 23-year-old married Bangladeshi young woman explained: *'Girls can contribute [to politics], but it must be done in a disciplined manner. It is definitely better if you work with the consent of your family and with discipline.'* A 19-year-old young woman explained that although she had supported the protests, she had no say over joining them: *'My family didn't allow it [to join the protest]. I will vote for whoever my father chooses.'* For some young people, these beliefs about women's role in politics were also connected to religious convictions about the different roles of women and men; as one 15-year-old Bangladeshi adolescent explained, *'Our Prophet Muhammad said that in a nation led by a woman, Allah's blessings are less. The Prophet said that women can do business and share their knowledge, but they should not be in leadership positions.'*

The belief that women do not belong in politics was particularly pronounced among Rohingya refugee young people (74%, in comparison to 51% of Bangladeshis who felt that a woman could not be a good mother and wife as well as a political leader). Rohingya young women and adolescent girls also had more limited agency than their Bangladeshi peers over choices such as education, work and marriage; for example, at endline, only 5% of Rohingya young women were enrolled in some form of education, compared with 32% of their Bangladeshi peers. Rohingya young women were also more likely than males (59% compared with 21%) to feel worried or anxious as a result of the political changes brought about by the 'July Revolution'. Qualitative findings show that this was connected to precarity in aid funding engendered by the revolution, exacerbated by a lack of agency and knowledge; as one Rohingya 16-year-old girl explained, the political turmoil was generating '*a lot of uncertainty... A lot of news. A lot of people are dying. Nobody knows what is happening.*'

Parents' perspectives

Parental restrictions on adolescent children's phone use was heavily gendered. In both groups, older youth and boys had the most access to digital technologies. Among Bangladeshi young people, 52% of young people had access to a phone, tablet or laptop for their own personal use and 40% had access to a device with internet connectivity. These numbers were slightly lower among Rohingya refugees (46% and 29% respectively). A Bangladeshi father explained his concerns about allowing phones leading to inappropriate behaviour among girls in particular, and his wish to prevent this: '*It's not good for girls... they go out, wander around... use big mobile phones, send messages. That's why after 5th or 6th grade and Qur'anic studies, if a good marriage proposal comes, it's best to marry them off quickly.*'

Parents also expressed concerns about their adolescent children's involvement in the 'July Revolution'. One Bangladeshi mother explained: '*We've seen these [the student protests] in the news only. Some of our boys also went to participate in the protest... Some supported the BNP [Bangladesh Nationalist Party] and some of them the Awami League [the political party of the former Prime Minister Hasina which was banned under the 2025 Anti-Terrorism Act].*' A Bangladeshi father of an adolescent boy described his son's desire to join protests, but explained that he did not let him go for fear that he might become one of the thousands who had been hurt in violent crackdowns:

He wanted to go to Cox's Bazar with friends to join the movement. But I didn't let him go. He said, "The boys of Chhatra League [student wing of the Bangladesh Awami League] are going. Should I go?" I said no. He is my only son. If something happens to him, all my hope will be gone. What will I do then? That's why I didn't let him go.

Some parents also expressed that they felt poorly equipped to help their children to engage with politics at all because they themselves lacked this knowledge. One Bangladeshi father explained: '*I don't have the capacity or knowledge to teach them [how to contribute to society].*' Similarly, a Rohingya mother of adolescent children living in Cox's Bazar (Camp 24) noted that she does not interact with her children regarding politics and current affairs: '*They watch the news themselves. I watch a little bit of news sometimes.*' A minority of parents, however, were supportive of their children engaging in religious struggles – even on an international level. A Rohingya mother in Cox's Bazar (Camp 12) explained: '*I told them [her children] about the war between Israel and Palestine. If we as Muslims join the Palestinian war, we can become better Muslims. Because they are a Muslim country, everyone there is Muslim.*'

2. Ethiopia

Young people's perspectives and experiences

In Ethiopia, 63% of young people agreed that politics are irrelevant to a person such as themselves. However, the data reveals differences across regions, reflecting broader politicised ethnic dynamics. Young people in rural Afar were most likely to agree that politics are irrelevant to them personally (75%), with slightly fewer young people in Oromia agreeing (64%). Differences by gender were also significant; in Oromia, 71% of adolescent girls and young women felt that politics were irrelevant to them, compared to 53% of boys. Boys and young men were also significantly more likely to say they had talked about a community problem (27% of males, versus 9% of females), and although few people reported having actually taken action on an issue in their community, boys were again more likely to have done so (12% of males versus 4% of females). Qualitative data enables greater insights into these findings; for example, decision-making on everyday life was largely seen to be the realm of

parents rather than adolescents, as one young woman explained: *'I obey what they [her parents] order me to do.'*

In Afar, it is interesting to note that findings on gender and community action were reversed, with girls twice as likely as boys to have spoken with others about a problem (26% versus 13%). Nonetheless, as can be interpreted by the findings on the low relevance of politics for everyday life, this did not result in community participation – with only 11% of young people (with no gender differences) having taken action on an issue in their community – or political engagement more broadly. Qualitative findings underscore a general disengagement with formal politics; one 17 year old boy explained: *"I have never participated in any political activity...they are adults and old people who involve in these kinds of activities. Besides I am not educated and I don't know anything about politics...what I know is only keeping our cattle"*. Similarly, an 18-year-old young woman in Afar, when asked if they knew anything about what the state does, simply responded: *'I don't know anything about the government.'* Another married young women from Afar commented: *"I have never participated....I only see the government by the time they come here and call us for a meeting. I have never seen an election till now. I have never heard of that"*.

Although girls and young women reported that they could speak to peers about problems, decision-making about everyday life and their futures remained firmly with their parents; as one 15-year-old boy explained: *'In our culture, being a boy is more fortunate than being a girl, because girls do not have the right to decide on their marriage, education, and other things.'* While young women expressed frustration at times with this lack of input into decision-making about such important aspects of their lives, few felt able to express this to their parents.

In Amhara, where ethnonationalist conflict between Fano militias and the regional and federal government forces was ongoing at the time of data collection, young people were least likely to share the perspective that politics were irrelevant (56%). Indeed, findings show that 88% of young people in Amhara's capital, Debre Tabor, and 78% of young people in rural areas of Amhara, said that their community had experienced conflict in the past four years. Findings about the visibility and impact of fighting in Amhara were also borne out in the qualitative data, with many young people describing either witnessing or experiencing violence themselves or having friends or relatives who had been affected by it. One young man in Debre Tabor explained: *'These days it has become normal for us to see the Fano fighters or government security forces everywhere in this town.'*

Many young people, and particularly girls in rural areas, expressed negative views about women's leadership. Although overall, 27% of young people agreed that a woman cannot be a good mother and wife while also involved in politics, this view was held by only 18% of urban young people, but 43% of their rural counterparts. These findings reflect gender norms about decision-making from all regions, which align masculinity with leadership. As one young man in Debre Tabor explained: *'There is a saying in our community that elaborates women's incapability to decide on issues. The saying is, "No matter how women know it, men decide on it".'*

Young people in Ethiopia, particularly educated youth, boys, and those living in rural areas, were also increasingly aware of misinformation and disinformation being spread online in the context of the Tigray war (2020-2022) and related ongoing localised conflict in Amhara region since 2023. Informed adults were key to obtaining information about where to obtain trustworthy information, as one young man in South Gondar explained:

The school principal told all the students about fake news. And the school spread the message not to believe everything posted on online platforms. And the school principal also told us to check news or information across various sources.

Parents' perspectives

Generalisable findings were observed across regions regarding gender and digital connectivity. Across all regions, quantitative data shows that young men and young people living in urban areas were more likely to have access to a phone, especially one that is internet-enabled. In the qualitative findings, this was sometimes linked to financial access, with older youth more likely to be earning money; it was also linked to furthering their education. A mother in urban Dire Dawa (for example) noted that, *'I monitor what they watch and they also do not have interest to watch other things. For instance, they see cartoons and it helped them to listen and speak the Arabic language. The same is true of the English language.'* However, parents frequently also expressed concerns about digital connectivity being inappropriate for daughters. As one mother in East Hararghe, rural Oromia, explained regarding her decision to only permit her daughter a phone if it was closely monitored:

She might use her mobile for romantic purposes when her father isn't around... Families prevent girls from using mobiles for romance because if a girl uses her mobile for such purposes, it could harm her life and lead to negative consequences.

Parents' views of politics differed markedly by region. In Afar and Oromia, parents tended to treat politics with suspicion and often did not like to speak about it – especially those parents who were less educated. A father in Afar explained that his perception of politics was that it was about delocalisation and centralising power, and he did not like to speak with his son about politics: *'I think politics is when government officials talk to the people about dismantling the woreda [administrative division/district] or the kebele [village unit]. I prefer not to talk about politics, so I never discuss it with him.'* Another father in rural Oromia explained that he did not feel able to speak about politics because he was not sufficiently informed to give his opinion:

We cannot talk about this [politics, with their children]. We only talk about our work and livelihood. We do not talk about other issues. We do not know about such issues. Others may know about such issues... A person who can read can talk about this [politics].'

By contrast, in Amhara and in urban areas – which have experienced more recent conflict – parents were more open to discuss political beliefs and participation with their children. A mother in Dire Dawa who is actively engaged in local politics spoke about strongly encouraging her children – including her daughters – to participate in community actions:

Even I used to participate in community engagements and politics as a model. They also do it. Especially my second daughter participates on my behalf sometimes. I am the strong proponent of this regime and actively engage in it. I am a Prosperity Party member who is appreciating our leader. If I have money, I donate to the party.

Another mother from Debre Tabor noted that she places strong emphasis on advising her adolescent son to be a law-abiding citizen, attributing her attitude to the fact that she has some education:

I have some education, so I always advise my son to be respectful to the laws and rules of his school and his country as well. This is really what I have been doing since his childhood. I always advise my son and his siblings, to respect their country's laws, rules, and also their school's as well. I also advise him not to collaborate with those who recently work to destroy our country and who kill, loot and bother people.

Some parents also shared their own experience of participation in politics as a way to counsel their children about the risks of political engagement. A father from Debre Tabor stated:

I told them to avoid any participation in politics because I experienced problems related to politics. I was a member of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, during the Derg regime... I shared the problems I faced during that period because I wanted them to understand the issues if they chose to participate in any political activity. The current conflict is very confusing, and there is no safety anywhere. We are praying for peace.

3. Jordan

Young people's perspectives and experiences

There were much higher rates of political participation among young people in Jordan, despite the political environment there being broadly discouraging of protest. Only 45% of young people in Jordan felt that politics were irrelevant to a person such as themselves – a much lower proportion than in Bangladesh and Ethiopia. The war in Gaza has had a significant impact, with 14% of young people in Jordan reporting that they had taken part in an in-person protest or demonstration in the past year. A Palestinian¹ young man in Jerash refugee camp, aged 21, explained:

¹ Note that the Palestinians in the GAGE Jordan sample are ex-Gazan refugees without Jordanian citizenship living predominantly in Jerash camp, whose families were displaced after the 1967 Six-Day War. Approximately 634,000 stateless Palestinians live in the country (Ghazal, 2016).

We participated in many demonstrations that took place here in the camp to support our people in Gaza... Young people, males, females, the elderly and children participated in the demonstrations. Everyone participated in these demonstrations... Approximately 2,000 people.

There was significant variation by nationality, with 31% of Palestinian young women having taken part in an in-person protest in Jordan in the past year compared with 4% of Syrian refugees living in camps or informal tented settlements. However, for many young people in Jordan, the war in Gaza had triggered an expanded political consciousness, including in relation to perceived connections across Arab cultures and the treatment of Arab states on the global political stage. A 22-year-old Syrian young woman from Azraq camp explained: *'There is no difference between us and Gaza... I have come to see the global outlook for us.'*

Despite higher rates of political mobilisation among young people in Jordan compared with Bangladesh and Ethiopia, many young people expressed dissatisfaction and frustration with politics, and only 51% of youth who were eligible to vote had done so in the country's most recent elections. One 18-year-old Jordanian young man explained:

People's voices don't matter. If the government truly considered the people's needs, the country would develop more – like reducing unemployment... Young people are frustrated with that. They protest, but it's pointless because nothing changes.

This being said, Jordanian young people have notably more agency in relation to formal politics than their refugee peers – they were more likely than their Palestinian or Syrian counterparts to have got involved in community action (15%, compared with 10% and 8% respectively). Participants in a focus group discussion with Syrian young women highlighted that a key reason behind political apathy in the refugee community was the displacement context and if they would be able to return to their country of origin they envisaged that they would be much more politically engaged:

I'm not interested in politics [in Jordan]. Honestly it doesn't matter to me... My god I wish we were able to vote in Syria... When it will be related to our country and about the people there will be discussions in the house. There will be excitement. If there will be elections, then the whole family will go to vote.

As in Bangladesh and Ethiopia, gender norms also shaped perceptions of who was entitled to a voice in politics. More than a quarter (28%) of young people felt that a woman could not be involved in politics while also being a good wife and mother. As one 18-year-old young woman explained: *'I prefer that women withdraw from politics. Men are smarter than women, we as women are reckless, we do everything without thinking. God has given more rights to men than to women.'* This perspective was not commonplace coming from girls; while 48% of young men and 37% of adolescent boys agreed that a woman could not be a political actor and a good wife, only 15% of female respondents shared this view. As a 21-year-old Palestinian young woman from Jerash camp emphasised:

If a girl acts and participates actively in society, so what? On the contrary, it reflects positively. Some fear their daughter will be photographed and posted on Facebook, or they worry she'll be talking and joking with a guy while acting – but he's just a colleague.

However, young women were much less likely than their male peers to have spoken to others in their community about a problem (6% versus 13%). Indeed, young women – across contexts – described having a general lack of decision-making power over various aspects of their lives, from day-to-day choices over what to wear, to more significant choices such as who to marry and when to stop their education. Quantitative findings, for example, show that 68% of young men versus 48% of young women felt they had a great deal of say over their education trajectories, with Palestinian young women and young women in informal tented settlements having the least agency over schooling decisions. While this is partly linked to strict age hierarchies that deter young people from answering back to parents, gender interacts with age to produce particular behavioural demands on girls, particularly in refugee communities. As a 19-year-old Syrian young woman observed, *'Girls don't have the freedom to make any decisions.'*

Parents' perspectives

Age and gender shape internet access among young people in Jordan, with parents expressing concerns about the propriety of girls being able to access social media sites. Although quantitative endline data shows that 73% of young people had an internet-enabled device (such as a phone or laptop) for their own use, adolescent girls

under 19 years were least likely to (55%), compared with young men aged over 19 who were most likely to (91%). One 19-year-old Syrian young woman explained: *'My father believes that girls shouldn't use phones until marriage... That's what my uncles think too.'* Refugees are also less likely to have internet access than their Jordanian peers (72% versus 80%), in part due to cost, but also due to parental fears that young people might get entangled in online spaces that could cause offline problems. A Syrian father in Zaatari refugee camp explained his worry about his son while online: *'There's bad sites... the phone has illegal things.'* Similarly, a mother from Azraq camp emphasised her fear that phone access could expose her children to ideas and practices that are not compatible with her family's Muslim faith:

I feel afraid that the children hold phones. So, until this period I am careful that only one phone will be in the house!... We turn a blind eye to the thing that harms us. Based on our upbringing as Muslims... we came to life to take the good thing of it! We don't look to the bad, our God won't hold us accountable that it passed by us.

In terms of political participation, some parents encouraged their children's involvement in local community centres so that they could develop a sense of contributing as citizens to the common good. A Jordanian mother in Jerash governorate spoke enthusiastically about encouraging her children's community volunteerism: *'Volunteering is normal... I encourage them to participate through education... They can go to communicate with peers and to share in volunteer activities... I wish that they participate and I encourage them to participate.'* Similarly, a key informant working at a youth empowerment programme in a host community in Amman noted:

The centre accepts adolescents from 14 until the start of university. There are programmes addressing them. We try to enhance their democratic behaviour. There is an election stimulation programme for grade 8 students... They are also taught about leadership. We give them a programme which is empowering young adolescents, so they can volunteer later on.

By contrast, for young people from the Syrian refugee community, where participation in formal politics is precluded based on their (non)citizenship status in Jordan, informal participation as an alternative was nonetheless seen by some parents a source of trouble, to be avoided. One Syrian mother in Zaatari camp explained that she taught her children to stay out of politics: *'We don't want politics... we don't get involved in politics... Many people have gotten into trouble over one mistake.'* Similarly, a key informant from Azraq camp explained that it is challenging to get especially male adolescents to participate, as parents prioritise their involvement in income-generating activities over community collective action.

Females are more likely to participate in volunteering activities because they stay in the camp. Males tend to focus on financial opportunities. In the past, there were sessions for psychological support and awareness, and people participated because they were financially stable. Now, they want something tangible, like money to pay for food, education or other needs... Some organisations offer small incentives like 10 liras, or internet access, so people attend just for that.

Discussion

A number of themes emerge from the data that have important implications for strengthening understanding of political fragmentation in the Global South and its relationship to youth civic engagement. First, the findings underline that young people across all country contexts feel largely disengaged from formal, institutional politics, contributing to a trend towards political fragmentation. In each context over the past decade, as in many countries of the Global North, protest movements have unfolded, often spearheaded by young people – including the 'July Revolution' in Bangladesh, demands for a ceasefire in the Israeli–Gaza conflict in Jordan, and the Fano and other youth movements in Ethiopia that have been consequently central to ongoing conflict. However, findings from the GAGE longitudinal study show that the majority of young people were not able to secure a meaningful role in these movements for political change, and where they had, they felt frustrated at their failure to contribute to a genuine social transformation.

A variety of overlapping dynamics within the broader macrostructural environments in each country appear to be further contributing to disengagement from formal politics. These have included expanded internet access in the Global South, exposing young people to political disinformation and misinformation, and fostering inter-ethnic and inter-nationality tensions that have not been adequately engaged with in formal spaces and, in some cases, even fostered by the state for political ends. In Jordan, which is host to large numbers of Syrian and

Palestinian refugees, the war on Gaza and the unanticipated regime change in Syria in late 2024 have engendered a marked uptick of interest in politics, especially among young people in refugee communities. By contrast, in Ethiopia, repeated conflict episodes involving coerced mobilisation of young people and a lack of meaningful change in rural and peri-urban areas have led to widespread disillusionment with politics among youth. Similarly, limited change in rural Bangladesh, and especially for the forcibly displaced Rohingya in the vast Cox's Bazar camps, following the 'July Revolution', has not ignited a strong sense of political engagement among young people.

Indeed, findings on political disillusionment and disengagement indicate that parents play an important influential role in the development of political subjectivities during their children's adolescence, and in shaping or constraining opportunities for civic participation at all levels (Janmaat and Hoskins 2022). However, young people who are already politically marginalised – especially girls and refugees, have this marginality reinforced by parents' own disengagement from politics and their wish to prevent their children from becoming involved. This challenges findings elsewhere that point to parents playing a positive role in their adolescent children's civic engagement, though largely focused on urban settings and in country contexts with stronger traditions of participatory democracy (Belay and Tefera 2023; Guglielmi and Maggini 2025). For refugees in Jordan and Bangladesh exclusion is in part connected to legal status prohibitions, which, when combined with authoritarian political environments, can make parents fearful of even discussing politics. Yet as Sime et al (2023) observe, the lack of a sense of belonging that being excluded from citizenship practices and being subject to discrimination can hamper emergent citizenship as refugee youth may fail as a result to develop the political literacy and efficacy to engage in civic activities as they age.

Gender norms also play a vital role in shaping political participation and attitudes in ways that are often neglected in the literature on young people's civic engagement. In rural areas and among parents who are less educated, there is also a lack of confidence for supporting adolescents to navigate politics. Many young people, especially among certain communities (such as rural youth in Ethiopia, Syrian refugees in Jordan, and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh) are first-generation learners and thus have less opportunity to seek guidance from their parents about (for example) in-person and online misinformation and disinformation. At the same time, many parents appear to feel that their role is to impart knowledge about issues, rather than to foster critical thinking skills that support young people to learn for themselves. For example, in Ethiopia and Bangladesh, parents – and especially mothers – stated that they did not know enough about politics to offer guidance to their adolescent children.

Moreover, across all contexts is that girls face greater restrictions around their decision-making and mobility which in turn constrains their emergent citizenship, especially when they are younger. This also inhibits their capacities to develop the kind of skills necessary to engage in political life and even undermines their ability to imagine futures in which they are active leaders and participants in decision-making. Especially in rural areas and among refugee communities, gender norms are reinforced by families and communities to constrain young women's participation. These gender inequities are exacerbated by a dearth of female role models in the political arena; and girls and young women often report that they are frequently not included in family discussions on political events and face much tighter surveillance of their online activities than their male peers, limiting their opportunities for civic engagement in digital spaces. As seen in the findings, parents are frequently key reinforcers when it comes to girls' lack of autonomy and decision-making power, often acting out of a desire to protect their daughters. However, this protection also inhibits girls from developing the skills they need to be active participants in political and civic life, producing a self-perpetuating cycle of gendered exclusion that undermines youth participation agendas that emphasise equity and inclusion. This is also often internalised by girls, who perceive themselves as incapable of engaging with politics.

Although expanded digital access has strengthened young people's access to information and participation online, GAGE findings underscore that internet access is also shaped by social inequalities at the family, community, regional/sub-national and national levels. Converting online information into offline activities requires a particular set of connections and skills in contexts where formal politics is hierarchical and exclusionary – the exact issues that Bangladeshi youth sought to highlight in the 'July Revolution'. Young people report that there is a dearth of opportunities for them to become involved in volunteer work in their communities, and to develop the team working and leadership skills that constitute key antecedent attributes for adult civic and political engagement. When such opportunities are provided, they often accrue to young people from urban educated elites, and/or are short term in nature rather than sustained, so as to be adapted to young people's evolving civic and political capacities.

Political authoritarianism in each context also means that access to information is controlled through internet shutdowns, arrests for activism and leads to youth self-censorship out of fear of reprisals. Ethiopia leads Africa in the number of internet blackouts it has implemented over the past decade, while in Jordan, the authorities have frequently implemented shutdowns and slowdowns amid periods of protest and unrest. And in Bangladesh, the internet was blacked out for 22 days amid the 'July Revolution' (Hosain 2025). These acts further disrupt possibilities for young people to build participatory practices that connect them with formal politics.

Findings on online participation inequalities also do not only show how inequalities in participation sustained within political systems; they embody what Heeks (2022) describes as 'adverse digital incorporation', wherein digitally-mediated mobilisation by young people offers few benefits to young people themselves, while generating a multitude of harms and risks. In Ethiopia, as discussed, social media sites have been central to ethnonationalist mobilisation both prior to and during recent conflicts; yet they are also breeding grounds for misinformation. Those who benefit from the hate speech that is stirred up online to validate and encourage youth participation in armed violence are not young people themselves, but those with preexisting power (Heeks 2022). While school teachers in some regions of Ethiopia were able to advise students about the risk of 'fake news', school closures during conflict often prohibited contact with trusted adults outside the home; yet parents, especially second generation learners, often lack the education and critical literacy skills to support young people in navigating misinformation – as well as not wanting their children to engage with politics for other reasons.

Stark age hierarchies also dominate the formal political sphere in each context, with very limited scope for young people to participate meaningfully, severing the link between formal political engagement and online 'expressive citizenship' (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2025). Political legitimacy is normatively anchored in age, as is often embodied through the mediation of family and community disputes by informal elder councils. And although young people may be mobilised for political purposes, they are often then denied a space and voice in deciding political futures. This is especially the case in contexts of conflict, where young people are still often seen as a threat rather than political actors with a stake in a future based on peace and justice.

Looking at the intersection of youth civic engagement with structural conditions in each context, it also becomes clear that broader political tensions are undermining possibilities for positive and sustained youth collective action – in turn exacerbating political fragmentation and divisions. In Ethiopia, for example, the Fano youth movement in Amhara was initially involved in broadly peaceful political agitation for change. However, ongoing inter-ethnic tensions that have characterised the ongoing conflict have led to the movement's evolution into what is now a heavily armed ethno-nationalist insurgency. In Jordan and Bangladesh, inter-nationality tensions between nationals and refugees also remain, exacerbated by aid cuts and, in the case of Jordan, by the end of the civil war in Syria, which has triggered the government to enact policies that pressure Syrian refugees to return to Syria, even though it may not be safe for them to do so. Thus, while socio-political changes have sometimes offered a window for expanded civic engagement (for example, during the political unrest that led to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed taking office in Ethiopia, the fall of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, and during protests against the Gaza conflict in Jordan), inequalities have been sustained over time.

Conclusion

A multi-level, intersectional analysis, wherein adolescents' and young people's emergent citizenship via increased political participation and civic engagement is recognised as shaped by a nexus of diverse socio-ecological influences that evolve over adolescence into early adulthood, draws attention to the role of parental inputs and broader socio-political dynamics in shaping young people's evolving political capacities. This approach has offered important insights into supporting youth civic participation amid growing political disillusionment and fragmentation. Ensuring that efforts to address political fragmentation engage with families and caregivers, and challenge gender norms that preclude girls (and especially the most marginalised girls) from developing political capacities, will be essential for fostering inclusive and equitable political participation and civic engagement by adolescents and young people.

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