



The Role Of State And Non-Governmental Sectors In Ensuring The Active Participation Of Girls And Young Women: The Experience Of Scandinavian Countries

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the complementary roles of state institutions and non-governmental organisations in enabling the civic and public participation of girls and young women, using Norway, Sweden and Denmark as comparative cases. Participation is examined through rights-based and empowerment approaches that distinguish presence from real influence. Historical-institutional, comparative, normative-legal and content-analysis methods are applied to academic research, legislation and official policy documents. The findings show that Scandinavian practice is strongest when four mechanisms operate together: permanent channels for youth input, transparent public support for autonomous civil society, gender-responsive access and safety measures, and an accountable feedback loop between proposals and decisions. Norway relies on legally required local youth councils, Sweden combines administrative coordination with public grants, and Denmark draws heavily on consultative bodies and a dense network of youth associations. For Uzbekistan, the article recommends adapting these functions through girl-inclusive local youth bodies, competitive support for girl-led initiatives, reasoned official responses to youth proposals and gender-disaggregated monitoring indicators.

KEYWORDS: Girls, young women, youth participation, gender equality, civil society, non-governmental organisations, youth councils, leadership, Scandinavian countries, public policy, social partnership, Uzbekistan.

INTRODUCTION

The meaningful participation of girls and young women is a component of democratic governance, human-capital development and gender equality. In this article, participation means the ability to formulate a view, communicate it through a safe and accessible channel, reach a responsible decision-maker and receive evidence that the view was considered. Attendance at an event or formal membership in a council therefore represents only the entry point. The right to be heard under Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child gives this issue a legal foundation, while the empowerment perspective adds access to resources, skills and shared responsibility [1; 3].

A gender-responsive approach is required because youth are not a homogeneous social category. Girls may face restrictive stereotypes, unequal domestic responsibilities, limited mobility, online harassment, lower access to informal political networks and different expectations about leadership. These barriers interact with residence, disability, income, ethnicity and age. A formally open mechanism may thus remain substantively unequal. The

analytical question is whether public institutions and civil society jointly convert equal rights into usable opportunities for influence.

Norway, Sweden and Denmark provide useful cases because they share democratic welfare institutions and extensive voluntary sectors while organising youth participation through different institutional instruments. Norway gives a comparatively strong legal position to local youth councils; Sweden uses a specialised public agency and grant system; Denmark relies more extensively on consultation and organised civil society. The broader Nordic framework treats children and young people up to the age of twenty-five as a priority group and requires youth and gender perspectives to be integrated across programmes [7; 8].

The purpose of the study is to identify how state and non-governmental functions are combined in Scandinavian participation systems and which elements can be functionally adapted to Uzbekistan. The analysis addresses three questions: which institutions connect youth voice with public decisions; how public finance can support civil society without eliminating its autonomy; and which safeguards are needed for girls to participate on equal terms. The term “girls and young women” covers minors and young adults within the youth-policy age range, while recognising that their legal status and support needs differ.

ANALYSIS OF SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE

The literature on children’s and youth participation developed from classifications of formal inclusion towards models of influence and shared power. R. Hart’s ladder distinguishes manipulation and tokenism from progressively stronger forms of participation [2]. H. Shier translates this continuum into organisational commitments, ranging from listening to young people to sharing power and responsibility [4]. These models show that the number of councils or meetings cannot by itself demonstrate democratic participation.

L. Lundy offers a more operational rights-based framework consisting of space, voice, audience and influence [3]. A safe opportunity to speak must be supported by information and skills; the message must reach a person with authority; and its effect on the decision must be traceable. N. Wong, M. Zimmerman and E. Parker similarly distinguish symbolic participation from pluralistic and youth-led forms of empowerment [5]. Together, these approaches provide criteria for assessing state-civil society partnerships.

Recent Nordic research stresses that institutional abundance does not guarantee equal influence. The Nordregio comparison finds that youth participation remains uneven, especially in rural and intermediate areas, and calls for clear pathways from youth input to public decisions [6]. Nordic policy guidance also requires gender analysis, gender-disaggregated information and attention to the diversity of young people [7]. This literature shifts evaluation from counting activities to examining access, authority, resources and feedback.

A gap remains between youth-policy research, which often reports aggregated data, and gender-policy research, which frequently concentrates on adult women. The present study connects these fields by asking how mainstream youth institutions can be gender-responsive and how targeted support for girls can be linked to general decision-making structures. Its contribution is a comparative functional analysis rather than a claim that one national model should be copied in full.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research uses historical-institutional, comparative, normative-legal and content-analysis methods. The historical-institutional method identifies how durable rules, public agencies and youth organisations shape participation. A most-similar-systems comparison is applied to Norway, Sweden and Denmark, with attention to differences in legal status, administrative coordination and civil-society intermediation. Normative analysis covers international participation standards and the relevant legal foundations of Uzbekistan.

Official documents and academic works available through August 2026 were coded against five criteria: institutional permanence, inclusive access, resources and capacity, connection to decision-making, and accountability for results. The study is qualitative and does not infer causal effects on individual behaviour. Many Scandinavian documents address youth as a whole rather than girls separately; gender-specific conclusions are therefore limited to provisions on equality, safety, representation and intersectional access.

DISCUSSION

The comparison indicates that state and non-governmental sectors perform distinct, mutually dependent functions. The state supplies enforceable rights, stable institutions, finance and access to decision-makers. Civil society lowers participation costs, reaches groups outside formal politics, develops leadership skills and aggregates interests. Sustainable participation emerges when these functions form a continuous chain from outreach and capacity-building to deliberation, official response and monitoring. A break at any point turns participation into a short-term project or symbolic consultation.

Norway represents the strongest statutory model among the three cases. Since 2019, municipalities and counties have been required to establish youth councils or comparable participatory bodies [10]. National policy also supports voluntary youth organisations, including schemes administered through the Norwegian Children and Youth Council [9]. The combination matters: a legal council creates access to public agendas, while independent organisations prepare young people to formulate demands and sustain participation between meetings. Norway's Gender Equality Strategy 2025 2030 adds a policy basis for equal influence and protection from harassment [11].

The Norwegian model nevertheless requires continuous correction. Legal membership can favour confident, urban and institutionally connected young people. Gender balance in a council does not remove unequal speaking time, inaccessible procedures or digital abuse. Meaningful equality therefore depends on open recruitment, outreach to marginalised groups, accessible information, adult facilitation that does not dominate, and published explanations of how youth proposals affected municipal decisions.

Sweden illustrates an administrative and grant-based model. The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, MUCF, coordinates national work on youth and civil society, distributes public grants and supports democracy and young people's participation [12]. Its local-democracy work has included cooperation with municipalities and a region to develop participation methods, with particular attention to young people who experience exclusion [13]. This arrangement allows the state to set public objectives while organisations retain flexibility in outreach, peer learning and programme design.

The principal risk in a grant-based system is project fragmentation. Short funding cycles can produce visible activities without lasting organisational capacity. Transparent selection, multi-



year support, proportional reporting requirements and protection from political interference are therefore essential. Evaluation should measure influence and continued engagement rather than the number of seminars or participants alone.

Denmark demonstrates the importance of associational infrastructure. National participation is largely consultative and operates through sectoral procedures, interest organisations, youth panels and civil-society representation rather than a single cross-government youth consultation law [14]. The Danish Youth Council, DUF, brings together 78 children's and youth organisations representing more than 600,000 members and promotes democratic communities and youth influence [15]. Its strength lies in organised continuity, volunteer networks and the ability to aggregate diverse voices. Its limitation is that consultative input remains dependent on whether authorities respond and provide access to the relevant decision stage.

Across the three cases, institutional form varies, but the effective functions are consistent: a recognised channel, capable youth organisations, stable resources, gender-responsive design and a feedback obligation. A specific focus on girls should be integrated into mainstream youth bodies and supported by targeted measures. These measures include safe meeting and digital environments, mentoring, flexible schedules, transport support, confidential reporting routes, accessible formats, and outreach to rural girls, girls with disabilities and those from low-income households. Parallel structures are useful only when they lead back into institutions that possess decision-making authority.

Uzbekistan already has a legal foundation for functional adaptation. The Law "On State Youth Policy" identifies the Youth Affairs Agency as the specially authorised public body in this field [16]. The Law "On Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men" provides for equal participation, cooperation with non-governmental organisations and advisory bodies involving civil-society representatives [17]. The national Gender Equality Strategy to 2030 supplies a longer-term policy framework [18]. The central task is thus to connect existing institutions through procedures that make girls' influence visible and measurable.

Four practical measures follow from the comparison. First, existing youth consultative bodies at district and city level can introduce open selection, balanced representation and a standing working group on the priorities of girls and young women. Second, competitive public grants can support girl-led civic initiatives, with independent selection panels and proportionate reporting. Third, public authorities should register youth proposals and publish a reasoned response within a defined period, including implementation status. Fourth, NGOs, schools, mahallas and public bodies can jointly provide leadership training, legal literacy, digital safety and mentoring linked to real local policy questions.

Monitoring should follow the logic of space, voice, audience and influence. Relevant indicators include the territorial and social diversity of participants; the share of girls who receive preparatory support; the proportion of proposals formally considered, accepted or answered with reasons; the continuity of girl-led organisations after funding; and reported safety or access barriers. Data should be disaggregated by sex, age, disability and territory while protecting privacy. Such evaluation would shift policy attention from event counts to institutional impact.

CONCLUSION

The experience of Norway, Sweden and Denmark shows that active participation by girls and young women depends on an institutional partnership between public authority and autonomous civil society. Norway demonstrates the value of legally required local channels, Sweden shows how a specialised agency and transparent grants can strengthen participation, and Denmark reveals the democratic capacity created by broad youth associations. None of these instruments is sufficient in isolation. Their effectiveness rests on inclusive access, resources, safety, access to decision-makers and an observable response to youth input. For Uzbekistan, the most appropriate approach is selective institutional adaptation within the existing youth-policy and gender-equality framework. Girl-inclusive local youth bodies, competitive support for girl-led initiatives, formal feedback requirements and gender-disaggregated impact indicators can transform participation from episodic mobilisation into a stable democratic practice. This approach would strengthen leadership competencies, public trust and the responsiveness of local governance while preserving the contextual role of mahallas, educational institutions and national civil-society mechanisms.

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