European Youth Advocacy Handbook
YouAct: European Youth Network on Sexual and Reproductive Rights

YouAct is a youth-led network. Its members are young people from across the Council of Europe active in the field of Sexual and Reproductive Rights. Since its launch in Lisbon in 2004, YouAct has grown into an increasingly effective youth-led organisation, undertaking key advocacy, training and awareness raising activities. We also work at the European regional and international levels.

YouAct works to empower young people to take an active role in their communities and organisations, and to advocate for sexual and reproductive rights as human rights. YouAct believes that decisions affecting young people should be planned and formed with the meaningful participation of young people themselves.

YouAct envisions a world where sexuality is recognised as a positive aspect of life, and where young people have access to information and services so that they can make informed decisions, about all aspects of their sexuality and reproductive lives, free from coercion and discrimination.

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Acronyms

EP European Parliament
EU European Union
ICPD International Conference on Population and Development
MDGs Millennium Development Goals
MEP Member of the European Parliament
NGO Non-governmental Organisation
ODA Official Development Assistance
SRHR Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
CSE Comprehensive Sexuality Education
UN United Nations
About the European Dialogue for Youth Rights project

YouAct took the initiative to develop this handbook as part of the European Dialogue for Youth Rights project. European Dialogue for Youth Rights was jointly developed and implemented in partnership with Choice: for Youth and Sexuality, Restless Development and Hope XXL, and co-financed by the European Commission’s Youth in Action Programme.

Through the European Dialogue for Youth Rights project we designed and delivered training and structured support, aimed at facilitating young people to engage in dialogue with European decision makers on issues that impact young people’s ability to exercise their rights.

By extension, we also hoped to facilitate young people becoming more involved in the European and international decision-making processes, which will have an impact on the degree to which young people’s rights, both in Europe and globally, can be realised over the coming decades.

Introduction

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are often viewed as “politically sensitive” or controversial, especially as they relate to the lives and experiences of young people. This can pose challenges to the development of national and international policies and regional positions which affirm the right of young people to make free and informed choices about their own bodies and lives. As long as the status quo continues, the fact will remain that past and present generations of young people and adolescents have been the most in need of sexual and reproductive health services and information, but were the least likely to have access to them. Nothing about this picture is right, but it can change.

Young people are mobilising on a global scale to ensure their human rights, and particularly their sexual and reproductive rights, are prioritised on the political agendas of every region in the world. This movement of young people has grown exponentially in the 10 years since YouAct was first convened as an informal group. We are now working within a community that has diversified significantly, and become more sophisticated in how it coordinates and communicates.

Young people around the world are already calling for governments to give them a place at the table. By pushing to be a part of the conversation, and by initiating dialogue with one another, we are already changing the nature of conversations in countries and regions across the world. But to create sustainable and lasting change, we feel the movement for youth rights, and particularly sexual and reproductive rights, must be completely inclusive of youth voices in all their diversity. Furthermore, it must be responsive to the needs young activists identify for themselves.
YouAct recently conducted a youth peer-to-peer research project looking at the experiences of young people in Europe who are working to further sexual and reproductive health and rights in their communities, and bringing their learning and expertise to the national, regional and international levels. Our research asked young people to share with us their motivations for working in the field, and their experiences of it.

We found that many young people expressed interest in meeting with decision makers and participating in policy-making processes, but that they lacked the skills and support to make youth-led advocacy a reality. Many of these young people work on SRHR issues on the ground in their communities, and have first hand knowledge of how key issues affect the lives of young people. However, most young people we interviewed reported a need for increased training, support, investment and encouragement to enable them to share their perspectives with policy makers. This handbook seeks to help bridge that gap.

This handbook is aimed at supporting and empowering young people in Europe with information, tools and inspiration to meet with their decision makers, particularly their representatives at the European Parliament. For young people, this is a first step towards understanding and actively participating in regional decision-making processes. We hope some of the content of this handbook will also be applicable to youth advocacy work on the national level, though specific country information is not contained within.

Feeling confident enough in your advocacy skills to be able to meet with a decision maker, and navigating European political structures are both challenging, especially for those who have not been involved in youth parliaments or the youth branches of political parties. The information in this handbook is geared towards youth who are actively working on the community level to further the rights and health of young people. In the following pages, we hope you will find information, resources, case studies and helpful tools, from advocates already engaging in European-level advocacy, towards supporting you in making your perspectives and experiences heard in the policy-making processes that affect your lives.

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In 2011, building on the Momentum of the International Year of Youth, YouAct hosted the European Youth Demand Change campaign. The campaign centred on calls to action, which were developed in partnership with European young people and youth-led organisations. The calls identified opportunities in the years leading up to 2015, where MEPs could demonstrate their commitment to putting young people’s rights at the heart of the Post-2015 development agenda. Calls to Action included:

- Prioritising program investments that contribute to achieving gender equality and recognising that securing the human rights of women and girls, including their sexual and reproductive rights, is necessary for achieving gender equality.

- Speaking out against discrimination and social stigma, and against movements within the EU and globally which call for policies that are detrimental to the full realisation of the health, human rights and well being of young people globally.

- Ensuring that the EU Agenda for Change recognises and addresses how civil society, NGOs and especially young people, in Europe and in the Global South, can be actively engaged and participate in EU processes.

- Renewing the European Commission’s commitments to achieving health, development, gender equality, and poverty eradication for all through continued implementation of the ICPD Program of Action and accelerate achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, particularly in regards to guaranteeing the SRHR of women and adolescent girls through universal access to a comprehensive package of sexual and reproductive health and information services.

The campaign calls were shared through social media channels, so that a broad base of young people could engage with the campaign by writing to their MEPs with the calls. This facilitated coordinated sharing of campaign messages with different MEPs across the EU. In the first few months of the campaign, the calls were sent to over 190 MEPs.

Many responded with statements of support and commitment. Some requested to have their names listed as supporters of the calls. Other MEPs replied to say they shared the calls to action with colleagues in their political parties and groups, as well as within the EP Development Committee. Supportive MEPs worked within a number of relevant committees, including the Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Committee, and the Committee on Budgets, which is responsible for the Multiannual Financial Framework, as well as the budgeting of the European Development Fund.
Basic Information about the European Parliament

The European Parliament represents European citizens. As the only European institution that is directly elected, citizens of the European Union (EU) choose who represents them in elections, which take place every five years. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have three places of work. Firstly, MEPs work from constituency offices in country, where members of the general public can contact and meet with them. Plenary sessions, or meetings of the whole Parliament, take place in Strasbourg, France and Brussels, Belgium. Meetings of the specific thematic committees on which MEPs serve are held in Brussels.

The European Parliament currently has 751 members including the President. Members of the European Parliament are elected in each of the EU’s 28 member states to serve a five-year term. The number of seats apportioned to each EU country varies, and depending on what country you live in, there may be between 6 and 96 national MEPs you can work with. You can look up your MEPs by country using the European Parliament’s website: www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/map.html

Candidates running for election do so on behalf of national political parties, but once elected, most of them will join transnational political groups, including:

- Group of the European People’s Party (EPP)
- Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)
- Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)
- Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)
- European Conservatives and Reformists’ Group (ECR)
- Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL)
- Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group (EFD)

Some MEPs, and increasingly more after the last election, choose not to be affiliated with any political group and join the Non-Inscrits (NI), a ‘grouping’ which denotes that the representative votes and develops their positions independent of any regional political group. Independent MEPs can fall anywhere on the political spectrum.

While most MEPs join established political groups, these groups cannot oblige an MEP to vote a certain way. Political groups can raise issues for debate in plenary sessions, and they can propose amendments.

Most national parties in your country have an affiliation with a European-wide political group. If candidates from these groups are elected in high numbers, they will have more influence on the decisions taken in the next legislative term of the Parliament. Additionally, the European Council takes election results into consideration during the process of selecting a nominee for President of the European Commission.
Why is the European Parliament relevant to SRHR advocacy?

With the adoption of several treaties, the role of the European Parliament has grown to comprise:

- Legislative responsibilities which enable the European Parliament to create a supportive policy environment, and take decisions on proposed legislation and reports relating to key SRHR issues

- Budgetary power which enables MEPs, Committees and political parties to influence the allocation of funding for health services, including sexual and reproductive health, through their role in the budget procedure of the European Union

- Monitoring of the democratic process, which enables the European Parliament and its members to ensure accountability, receive petitions from citizens, and demonstrate political will in addressing issues of concern to European constituencies

Through engaging with your MEPs you can, for example, gain champions for your issues, generate dialogue and political will on a regional level, or work to influence budgets for sexual and reproductive health programmes.

Furthermore, the EU is one of the largest contributors to Official Development Assistance (ODA), and is a main trading partner for most countries in the Global South. The EU and its member states have committed to contribute 0.7% of their Gross National Income (GNI) to Official Development Assistance.

First pledged in a General Assembly Resolution in 1970, this 0.7% target set for wealthy countries has been reaffirmed in many international agreements. The target of 0.7% was ambitious in 1970, but after nearly 45 years of economic growth, it is questionable whether this target is really aspirational anymore. However, many EU member states remain far from achieving it.

To find out more about ODA, where the EU and your country are in relation to meeting the 0.7% commitment, and for information about financing for population and development, and HIV/AIDS, both of which are critical to achieving SRHR in developing countries, check out Euromapping, an initiative of the European Parliamentary Forum (EPF) and Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevoelkerung (DSW):

www.euroresources.org/euromapping.html
General guidance for engaging in Advocacy at the European Parliament

• **Set a reasonable goal.** Define what reaching an advocacy ‘goal’ means to you. Is it a commitment from an MEP to investigate an issue further? Are you asking for a specific issue to be highlighted in an upcoming debate? Is the meeting itself an achievement? All of these are progressive steps, and it helps to have both short-term and long-term goals in mind.

• **Advocacy is a process.** You might not reach your goal in one meeting. What are the steps in your advocacy plan? Take notes to track progress and to remind yourself what you’ve put in and what you’ve achieved. And remember that even the seemingly smallest actions can plant the seed for a future policy change.

• **You’ll need information before you begin.** Where can you inform yourself about the person you are writing to or meeting with? What is the person’s remit, and where does your issue fit in the bigger picture of their work? All MEPs have personal pages on the European Parliament’s website, but get creative. If you are meeting with one or more of your national MEPs, you may want to find out more about which committees they’re involved with. Do they champion or have an interest in the issues you plan to address? Have they tabled relevant parliamentary questions or drafted reports? Have your partners worked with them? Which political party are they affiliated with? Has the MEP or their party expressed a public position on the issue you plan to bring to their attention? What do national laws and policies say about these issues? Researching answers to these questions will also support you in setting a reasonable ‘goal’ for the meeting, and preparing yourself for different directions the conversation could take.

• **Show appreciation for your friends and partners.** No person or individual can achieve political or social change when acting alone. Your friends and partners are there for mutual information sharing and support. Always treat these people with respect and kindness.

• **Prepare for different senarios.** You may be meeting with decision makers who have different degrees of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and rights. Because MEPs are responsible for decisions relating to many different policy areas, your expertise can support their work. At the same time, you may meet with a decision maker and discover that they are opposed to supporting the issue you’ve raised. Your research can help in anticipating this, but its best to be prepared for a variety of responses, and always be polite, and seek to meet those who disagree with respect and openness.

• **Always seek to clarify.** Watch out for abbreviations like “SRHR” and “CSE.” Use language that is accessible, and not specialist language or abbreviations common in your field. If, during your meeting, you encounter resistance, confusion or disagreement, try to ask questions to clarify the situation and be responsive to the perspective of the person you are meeting with.

• **Be honest.** You’re not expected to know everything. If there’s an issue you don’t feel certain of, be truthful about your level of knowledge and say, “I don’t know.” You can always offer to conduct further research into the issue and follow up with a written response to the MEP, outlining any questions she or he may have.

• **Follow-up.** Contact the MEP after the meeting to thank them for their time, provide any further information required, and to remind her or him of any agreements or action points emerging from your meeting.

• **Share your experience.** Report back to your fellow youth advocates on your impressions from the meeting to facilitate mutual support and learning.
Case Study: Hearing at the European Parliament by Katarina Glosová, YouAct Steering Committee member

In January of this year we held our annual general meeting in Bratislava, Slovakia where I live. As part of previous work I had done with YouAct and the Slovak Family Planning Association, I’d met with one of my MEPs, Ms Katarina Nevedalová. I knew my colleague Grace was coming a day early to prepare for the meeting, and I suggested we arrange a meeting with Ms Nevedalová to speak with her about youth advocacy at the European Parliament.

I reached out to her office to set up the meeting, and she and her assistant agreed to meet us for lunch. The meeting was very relaxed, despite her busy schedule. We talked about our work and shared that we were trying to set up a meeting between young people and decision makers in Brussels, and asked if she thought it would be possible to organise a hearing. We discussed ideas for possible themes, and over the course of the lunch, she agreed to host it. She said she liked seeing young people taking initiative, and was happy to support our efforts if we had the capacity to organise it.

Over the coming months, we worked closely with the helpful and supportive staff at Ms Nevedalová’s office. By March, we were able to bring together young people, MEPs, and parliamentary staff to discuss prioritizing comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and young people’s SRHR on the EP agenda. Ms Nevedalová opened the hearing by reinforcing her strong support for SRHR and youth rights, and shared how she sought to bring these issues to a European level during her time as an MEP. Young participants delivered presentations on diverse themes, which included personal reflections on participants’ experiences of the CSE they received and recommendations for integrating FGM prevention within CSE programmes. One youth peer educator who has worked with young people in care and young people who are not in school drew from his experiences to share best practices for reaching marginalized youth.

The young people present put so much thought into their presentations, and there was a sense of pride in the variety of experiences we could speak to together. A graphic artist took ‘visual minutes’ of the event, and tried to capture a piece of all our contributions.

The day before the hearing, participants all shared their expectations for event itself. Beforehand, the two biggest concerns participants had identified were that they feared they might not have enough knowledge, and that they might encounter opposition. But when the hearing was over, participants reflected that they actually wished there had been more opposition in attendance.

As we took time to reflect on the hearing, several things stood out for us. Firstly that we’d done it (!) and that felt like a huge achievement in itself. But the small steps along the way were crucial, too- the visibility we created for our issues by reaching 750 MEPs with invitations, and the genuine dialogue we had at the end of the hearing event. One participant summed up many of our feeling well when she said, “I particularly appreciated the debate part of the Hearing. The meeting was not as formal as I thought it would be and I think this was great because good discussions happen when people feel free to voice their opinions. So I really enjoyed the atmosphere and the conversation we had. I think the young advocates delivered interesting presentations and I believe we all managed to communicate our message very well.”
Ways to Engage

There are numerous ways of engaging with your MEP, including:

- **Writing to your MEP.** This is perhaps the easiest way of reaching your MEP to share your message or request a meeting. MEPs make their contact details publicly available online so that constituents can reach out.

- **Tweeting to your MEP.** Most MEPs have twitter accounts, and welcome the chance to interact with young constituents through social media. If you can keep your message to 140 characters, why not give it a try?

- **Raise the profile of your issue strategically.** Where do MEPs get their news? What media are they paying attention to nationally and locally? Why not write an article or a letter to the editor to attract attention to your cause?

- **Working with MEPs to initiate a letter.** While these are not binding, letters are helpful in building consensus and making a political statement. If an MEP initiates a letter and 50 other MEPs sign it, this is significant to garner media attention, raising awareness of your issue.

- **Generating dialogue and understanding through hearings and events.** MEPs and committee secretariats can support and host public hearings on issues that are topical to their committees. A hearing can bring together MEPs and other stakeholders including civil society, academics, and young people. Hosting an event or hearing at the Parliament will require sponsorship by an MEP. If you cannot secure support of an MEP, there are alternative options. These can include informal breakfast or lunch meetings with MEPs at the European Parliament, exhibitions, screenings, and other events.

Parliamentary Committees

Within the European Parliament there are 20 different Parliamentary Committees. The membership of committees ranges in size from about 25 to 70 MEPs. They meet once or twice a month in Brussels. Each committee has a chairperson, four vice-chair people, and many regular committee members, and substitute members. Reports of each committee are compiled by a rapporteur.

In the process of drafting laws, the European Commission will consult the committees as part of their standard procedure. The committees advise the commission by producing reports, in which they propose amendments; when necessary they may express their position more formally through a resolution.

Committees also produce own-initiative reports, which are on a topic relevant to the committee’s thematic focus. The process of developing own-initiative reports does not have to be initiated by the commission, but committees do need to get permission from the Conference of Presidents, which consists of the EU Parliament’s President, the chair people of the political groups, and a representative of the Non-Inscrits (Independents).

If a parliamentary committee adopts a report, it will be presented in a plenary session with the rest of the Parliament where amendments and resolutions may be proposed and examined, before MEPs vote to take a decision.

For young advocates, finding out which committees are most relevant to the issues you work on, and which MEPs sit on those committees, can be helpful in identifying which decision makers to work with.
Committees meet once or twice per month in Brussels and their debates are public. You can watch plenary sessions on EPTV:


or look up the outcomes of votes and MEPs’ voting records at Vote Watch Europe:


**Parliamentary Committees include:**

- Foreign Affairs (Acronym: AFET)
  - Human Rights subcommittee (DROI)
  - Security and Defence subcommittee (SEDE)
- Development (DEVE)
- International Trade (INTA)
- Budgets (BUDG)
- Budgetary Control (CONT)
- Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON)
- Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL)
- Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI)
- Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE)
- Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO)
- Transport and Tourism (TRAN)
- Regional Development (REGI)
- Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI)
- Fisheries (PECH)
- Culture and Education (CULT)
- Legal Affairs (JURI)
- Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE)
- Constitutional Affairs (AFCO)
- Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM)
- Petitions (PETI)

You can look up different Committees and their members using the European Parliament’s website:


Alternatively, you can look up MEPs by country and committee here:


Several parliamentary committees are relevant to SRHR in both a European and a development context, including: the Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee (and its subcommittee on Human Rights), the International Trade Committee, the Budgets Committee, the Development Committee, and the Culture and Education Committee, among others.
In my role as Coordinator of YouAct, I found myself leading on a series of projects focused on advocacy towards the European Parliament. According to my job description, my role is to coordinate the activities of a network of youth advocates, but I wasn’t explicitly hired to be an advocate. But for the past 9 months I have looked for and seized every opportunity to meet with and speak to MEPs and parliamentary staff about SRHR issues. Why?

Well, for starters, I am a migrant young person. I didn’t grow up in Europe. I might have heard of the European Parliament before I moved to Ireland at age 20, but it wasn’t really on my radar. I knew little to nothing about how it operated.

As I’m resident in Ireland, not a citizen, I have limited voting rights here and no right to vote in European elections. I was always told parliamentarians only want to meet with people in the hopes of winning their votes. I couldn’t even leverage one single vote. I didn’t feel like I had anything to offer.

So the idea of securing a meeting with an MEP, and leading on a project where I was supposed to inspire other European young people to do the same, was a little daunting to say the least. As I’m sure is the case for anyone, I feel it’s hard to lead without a good grasp of what one is leading on or towards. But I had to figure it out, and I had to start somewhere. My advocacy plan started with a google search.

I looked online and read about my MEPs. They were interesting - people who were activists, people who had worked in health and education. Some of their constituency offices were in my favourite neighbourhoods in Dublin- areas I went anyway, and frequently, and felt comfortable in.

The task at hand was to write to my MEPs about two campaigns we were working on. Now that I knew a little about the people I was writing to, I could make my emails and letters more personal. The first time I wrote to them, it was about a perennial issue (young people being made invisible at a policy level), and the second was about a process already in motion- the upcoming first vote on Edite Estrela’s SRHR report. Once I’d organized my thoughts, I was able to send off the letters pretty quickly. It occurred to me that it hadn’t been as hard as I’d thought.

At the end of my emails and letters, the last line expressed my willingness to meet if the MEP wished to discuss the issues more in depth. I didn’t think any of them would take me up on it, I didn’t think they’d be out of Brussels or Strasbourg anytime soon, but of course, six hours later, there was an email in my inbox from a parliamentary staff member offering to set up a meeting with the MEP at his constituency office in Dublin next week.

For my first meeting with an MEP, I was extremely nervous. I didn’t start out by meeting with the most oppositional MEP in my constituency, but as I am still learning the Irish political system and its parties, I wasn’t 100% confident we agreed on everything. But when do two people ever agree on everything? I just didn’t want to put my foot in my mouth.

I showed up early, waited patiently. When we met, I did my best to demonstrate that I respected the MEP for meeting
with me, and that I’d respect his time and keep it concise. I found that I was able to make my points fairly quickly, and then we just had a conversation about the upcoming vote and the political climate. I learned so much during that conversation, particularly about other committees and the relevance of SRHR issues to more committees than I’d initially thought.

The MEP affirmed that he would be voting for the report I’d written to him about, and he underscored that I should meet with MEPs from other political groups, and encourage my YouAct colleagues throughout Europe to do the same. This is crucial, because we can’t have any political influence if we stay in our comfort zones. We will face opposition, it won’t be easy or comfortable, but if we are present, respectful and open, change is possible.

And he gave me a good piece of insight, which reminded me of the value of YouAct’s work. He said that his office had already received thousands of letters from individuals opposing SRHR. But, he said, those letters were form letters, and some of them were threatening or aggressive. He said that MEPs would much rather be hearing from people like me, people who were reasonable and didn’t hide behind their laptops.

In the coming weeks, the vote took place. It did not go in the direction we had wanted, and the strong, rights-affirming report was voted down by a narrow margin. I think it was less than 10 votes. After the vote was over, while everyone else was filtering out of the room, a few stayed back to make statements. The MEP I’d spoken to was one of them, and he criticised the hostile dynamics that had taken place in the plenary before voting and reminded us that one outcome is one outcome, and social movements for social change are greater but take time.

I don’t know if my influence really had any impact at all- I’m sure it didn’t affect his vote, and he might have spoken up after the vote whether I was paying attention or not. And I was paying attention- I heard what he had to say live. I watched it on a live stream of the plenary debate. My partner makes fun of me for watching EP TV and UN Web TV. And well he should, it is embarrassing. Growing up in the U.S., I used to pity my grandmother for watching C-SPAN. Because C-SPAN, UN Web TV and EP TV have one thing in common. They are boring.

But there is one exception - when it’s an issue you care about - sometimes they can be more engrossing, harrowing and dramatic than any other reality TV show. Because they are really real. The drama doesn’t only involve the people in the room; it matters for national, regional and international policy, which involves a lot of people’s lives.

Anyway, that’s the story of my first advocacy meeting with a Member of the European Parliament. I thought I’d offer it in case it helps you to dispel nerves or fear or any of the other blocks that have prevented me from reaching out to my decision makers. And if you’re not already registered to vote, or reaching out to your representatives when you feel strongly that change is needed, then I hope you do both these things, and I hope you have an empowering experience.
Useful Resources and Further Reading:

**Publications**

**YouAct**’s Charter: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Young People, A Rights-Based Perspective.


Euromapping, an initiative of the European Parliamentary Forum (EPF) and Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevoelkerung (DSW), provides an analysis international donor funding for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and Official Development Assistance (ODA).


The European Parliament provides this useful introduction to the institution:


**Websites**

The website of the European Parliament provides detailed information on the Parliament’s powers and procedures, organisation and work, as well as history:


Sessions of the European Parliament can be viewed live online.


Vote Watch Europe gives a transparent overview of the votes and other activities of the European Parliament and Council.

[www.votewatch.eu](http://www.votewatch.eu)