



## Interview with Judith Bessant

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### Q. What initially motivated you to explore the intersection of gender and youth participation in your research?

A. I was motivated to explore the intersections of gender and youth participation partly because I considered it an important issue in my research for a number of theoretical, ethical, political and social reasons. I was also motivated by my own experiences as a student and then as a young woman working in the academy (Bessant 1998) and other institutions which were and still are masculine and misogynist spaces. I experienced first-hand sexual and age-based discrimination, harassment and various forms of overt and opaque violence. I also saw plenty of that behaviour going on around me. This often seemed odd to me especially in the late 1980s and 1990s given the raft of anti-sex discrimination legislation we had in place by then, and all official commitments to inclusive education, equitable workplaces and safe social institutions and society.

Throughout my academic career I remained curious about the discrepancies I saw between the official accounts about gender equity and claims by governments to promote youth participation. What I saw of the lived experience of girls, boys and women as they studied and worked inside schools, workplaces and communities revealed a huge gap between the theory and the actual practices (Bessant and Watts 2025).

I became interested in trying to identify and understand how what I saw happening were really embedded and normalised practices, what Bourdieu called habitus operating in certain fields like education, workplaces, and the state. I noted too how girls and young women were often not being recognised as having equal value. I also saw how they experienced inclusion or exclusion in decision-making processes in ways determined by their identity based on factors like their age and gender, as well as their ethnicity, and class (Bessant 2022; Bessant *et al.* 2025).

I was also interested in trying to promote a democratic idea of including more diverse experiences, ideas and voices in the deliberative and decision-making processes inside organisations or the whole community.

More recently it became apparent that girls, and especially quite young girls, were assuming significant leadership roles in various forms of contemporary political action linked to the climate justice movements. Along with some colleagues I followed young girls as they engaged in the public sphere and assumed centre stage for powerful speechmaking and leadership (Bessant *et al.* 2023).

**Q. In your opinion, what are the most significant barriers young women and gender-diverse individuals face today when engaging in political and civic participation? How does intersectionality, particularly concerning race, class, and sexuality, intersect with gender to shape the experiences of young activists?**

A. There are a number of “barriers” which include:

- A combination of long standing “adultist” age-based prejudices and sexism sustains harmful misrecognitions that define the subaltern status and experience of children and young people (Bessant 1998). This is also encouraged by some popular but problematic social-medical science research, or “scientism” (Bessant 2008), that works to bolster and reproduce the many negative stereotypes about young people as inherently irresponsible, lacking in good judgement, who are deemed cognitively and morally defective, and so incapable of being a citizen or a “proper” political agent). These accounts work intersectionality to further undermine, devalue, and denigrate young people by drawing on prejudices about gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity. This tends to mean that children, young people generally are not recognised as equal to others adult typically white, male political actors;
- The habitus of people including many experts, professionals and policy makers in many organisations and government agencies also function to sustain and normalise exclusionary practices based on age and gender. That habitus of these functionaries also encourages a blindness to various forms of deception that includes a politics of denial that works to uphold and reproduce various prejudicial world views and oppressive institutional practices;
- The dominant discursive regimes and/or conditions in which one becomes a “proper” speaker and in which deliberations occur;
- The “way things are” and the various powerful sectional interests that work to ensure the prevailing arrangements remain as they are. I refer particularly to a refusal or reluctance to share or cede power within the hierarchical structures of authority that characterise bureaucracies and organisations. That is, those in established positions are not likely to want to relinquish their privilege, authority or power to young people. In short, the dynamics of power relations and inequalities are a barrier to certain kinds of people (e.g. young people, girls etc) participating (with effect) in decision making processes.

**Q. Despite persisting barriers, young women and gender-diverse individuals have today much more opportunities to express their voice. How has the role of gender in youth participation evolved over time, and what lessons can be learned from these shifts?**

A. This is a big question. It may be the case that young women and gender diverse people now have more opportunities to use their voice, but the question remains: who is listening and what is happening when they do speak? There remain many obstacles to young women and gender diverse people being able to “express their voice”, but importantly to be seen and heard and to actually make a difference. Only days before this interview the recently elected 47<sup>th</sup> US President declared that there are “only two genders”.

One thing history teaches us is that while there are times when we get significant and speedy transformative change, most change if it happens occurs slowly.

We see evidence of how change takes time in the ways many girls and women (often in solidarity with others) have worked to contest exclusionary practices and prejudices and gender-based inequalities. Yet, this doesn’t always result in change.

I think of how a young Syrian girl, Bana al-Abed’ who, with her mother’s support, documented for the world what life was like for a child in war torn Syria. With an ISIS regime in charge years later the prospect of Syrian women being treated justly are slim. I think too of Emma Gonzales who in 2018 played a key role in the mobilisation of America’s gun control movement when she co-founded the gun-control advocacy group “Never Again MSD” in response to the mass killings in Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida in which 17 people were killed. But that gun movement has been utterly ineffective, and the killings continue.

The history of the women’s movement is an obvious example of how women’s action can help bring about positive change but as we know that takes time and is not enjoyed by everyone.

There are many historical and contemporary examples of how young girls and women have moved to claim a space and voice in the public sphere – noting too how there is a rich array of ways of participating. More recently this has been facilitated by the advent of digital technologies that have helped enable many hitherto excluded to enter the public sphere.

I refer to cases like Vanessa Nakate, a young Ugandan who began the climate change movement in January 2019 at the age of 23. She organised protests, speaking publicly, creating and exchanging content on-line and mobilising others. Then she went to Davos in early

2020 to take part in a major climate conference (Bessant 2021). She was invited to a photo shoot by US based Associated Press agency of herself standing alongside other young female climate activists who included Greta Thunberg, Loukina Tille, Luisa Neubauer and Isabelle Axelsson all of whom were young white activists. She was erased by the press agency from that group photo. In response Nakate created a video which she uploaded onto a digital platform to challenge the erasure of the only Black person in that image and the marginalisation of voices from the Global South. She got much exposure, followed by some apologies but the world is still heating up and the erasure of young black women and gender diverse people continues.

I am not saying this to spread despair or to justify apathy or a do-nothing attitude, but simply to say that helping to make change can be slow, hard and sometimes frustrating work as much as it can be rewarding. There are many people who are actively opposed to the interests of young women and gender diverse people and there are even more who don't care one way or the other. So those who are committed to deep justice for women and gender diverse people have to keep working hard and using any resources we have to achieve the changes we want.

**Q. What role do digital platforms play in amplifying or undermining gendered participation among youth?**

A. The advent of social media provides significant opportunities for many young people to access information, to communicate locally and globally, to cross borders and mobilise action, to extend and diversify their repertoires of political action and generally engage politically -often in highly effective ways. The growth of social media helped in organising and advocacy and has been an important "development" for going some way to overcoming many gendered norms and practices that create barriers to effective political participation. For many girls and young women, who historically, and in some cases now, have been excluded from public space and consigned to subordinate roles in domestic private-space, access to digital media has made a major difference in their capacity to access information, communicate and to participate politically.

This is one of many reasons to be alarmed about recent moves by governments like my own national government in Australia, to ban children under 16 from accessing social media. While there are some grounds for concern about social platforms, banning children under 16 (and excluding them from relevant debates) is a

deeply anti-democratic and harmful "solution" to any of those real problems.

The flipside to the increased access for girls and young women to social media, is that some young people who have engaged in political action and who identify as female or non-binary or who are neurodiverse are likely to experience censorship, abuse, and/or erasure on media platforms. This is to say nothing of how social and digital technology have been instrumental in driving the growth of "surveillance capital", and other kinds of surveillance. This aspect which is so significant to the political-economy of contemporary capitalism gets much less attention in public discussion than it warrants. The ways the billionaire owners of surveillance capital have "cosied up" to President Trump in 2025 highlights the obstacles to getting any traction in holding these organisations to account even in so-called liberal democracies.

If it is true that many girls and young women have also assumed the role of "influencers" to engage politically or for other reasons, equally we cannot ignore the role played by social media platforms in promoting 'toxic masculinity', misogyny, xenophobia, white supremacist racism, and authoritarian populism which seem to be encouraging increasing numbers of boys and young men to embrace far-right agendas and movements.

Finally I add that while acknowledging the significance of the relatively recent expansion of social media should not encourage us to forget the significant role young people played prior to the advent of social media in politics generally especially in bringing about major political change (Bessant 2018; Bessant 2021). I guess my point is that it is not wise to expect, as some people did in the late twentieth century, that the technological power of the new digital media would always work to support a more participatory democracy, bolster human rights, reasoned debate and social justice.

**Q. Young women have been at the forefront of global climate movements, advocating for environmental justice. What do you think drives their prominent leadership in this space, and how does their gender influence the public's response to their activism?**

A. Another good complex question. We certainly cannot ignore the relatively novel development of increasing numbers of girls and young women entering the public sphere, many of whom have assumed leadership roles and taken centre stage in global climate movements. We see this when we look at who is initiating and mobilising campaigns and a range of actions, who is speaking, who is "answering back". There are also many

young women now participating in more formal electoral and extra parliamentary politics.

I say this mindful that it is not a good idea to generalise about the experience of being young and female, or non-binary. That said, there are some commonalities which are often experienced differently depending on where and who you are.

Moreover, the young women and non-binary people who have led or participated in the global climate movements make up a small fraction of the whole population.

In respect to the second part of the question - what drives them to do what they do, my research with colleagues involved in an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project ('New Possibilities: Young People and Democratic Renewal')<sup>1</sup> found they were variously moved by a range of interests and emotions that included a sense of responsibility, feelings of betrayal, hope, righteous anger and fear. We found that many young people were tired of the broken promises, and the failures by too many older elite policy makers and leaders to consider their well-being and secure their right to inherit a planet that is habitable.

The rejection of traditional politics by many young people and girls suggests something significant is happening. We may well be witnessing the beginnings of a new kind of social and political imaginary brought forth through the hands of girls and young women.

**Q. Recent studies indicate a growing gender gap among young people, with young men showing increased support for conservative and far-right ideologies. Young men appear to have become more patriarchal in their orientations compared to young women and even older men. Moreover, conservative and far-right parties have gained traction particularly among young men who feel sidelined by mainstream politics. Considering these trends, how do you interpret the role of gender in influencing young people's attraction to far-right movements and what should/could be done to reverse these trends?**

A. We cannot ignore the toxic forms of racism, prejudice, and discrimination that are being promoted and amplified in our social media. We need to acknowledge the highly toxic role of "influencers" like Andrew Tate, and "Sneako" (Nicolas Kenn De Balinthazy) who promote extreme masculinity-misogynistic memes and val-

ues, and play on the vulnerabilities of many boys and young men trying to work out who they are and what their future holds for them. The fact is that over the past half century many of the traditional forms of masculinity that once were taken for granted have been seriously questioned and contested. This raises questions about what it means to be a boy or a man in a context which many people experience become at different levels more and more precarious. We are looking to a future where it cannot be assumed men will be the major or only breadwinners, where secure employment for life is increasingly unlikely and where traditional white male "white" privileges no longer prevail as they once did. Yet it is important not to generalise or essentialise. We need to acknowledge that many boys and young men today abhor and reject the kinds of far-right politics marked by white supremacist racism, xenophobia, homophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia or a predilection for conspiracy theories and hyper-violence.

**Q. Research on youth participation has largely highlighted the critical role of socialization processes, mentorship, and role models in fostering consistent youth engagement. Considering the contemporary political and public arenas, which politicians do you believe serve as significant role models for young women today? What about non-political public actors (e.g., celebrities, writers, etc...)? How do these figures influence young women's aspirations and participation in political and civic life?**

A. Unfortunately, I don't think there are too many female political leaders or political figures who are significant role models for young women. I can think of US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or a small number of Australian Members of Parliament including Monique Ryan, Zali Steggall and Zoe Daniels but I am hard pressed to think of any others.

While we do now have more women in formal politics, I think by the time many either get elected or become leaders they are so compromised by the process of demonstrating their fitness for leadership they have forgotten what they stood for. I think of examples like former US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton or former Vice President Kamala Harris.

Just because you are a woman does not mean that makes you a positive role model. You need to demonstrate continual valuable-good character and virtues such as courage, clarity, honesty, integrity along with a commitment to values like equity, fairness, and an inclusive vision of social justice. On this point I think there are some male politicians who make good role mod-

<sup>1</sup> Collin, P., Bessant, J., Catanzaro., M., Gordon, F Jackson, S, Watts, R., Australian Research Council funded project 'New Possibilities: Young People and Democratic Renewal ' [https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/young-and-resilient/projects/current\\_projects/New\\_Possibilities\\_Young\\_People\\_and\\_Democratic\\_Renewal](https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/young-and-resilient/projects/current_projects/New_Possibilities_Young_People_and_Democratic_Renewal)

els for young women -and men- because they are clear about their end purpose and who ensure what they do is aligned with valuable political commitments. I have in mind the Australian Independent Senator David Pockock who, amongst other things continually worked to support young people and young women in particular on climate change, and former Australian Senator Bob Brown, a tireless campaigner for climate justice.

**Q. In your research, have you come in contact with particularly interesting projects and/or policies considering the intersection of gender and youth participation?**

A. In terms of the research I can think of a number of people who are doing good work at the moment addressing intersecting inequalities and how they connect to young people's political participation and to various campaigns for justice. I have in mind Dena Ayra (University of Birmingham), Juliana Bidanure (New York University), Laura Lundy (Belfast University) and Aoife Daly (University Cork) and the Centre for Youth Climate Justice. Colleagues of mine at the Young and Resilient Centre at Western Sydney University like Phillipa Collin and Michelle Catanzaro, and then there is Eve Mayes and her colleagues at Deakin University Australia all of whom are doing great work studying and encouraging young people's political participation. I think too of Blanche Verlie (University of Sydney), Ben Bowman (Manchester University), Sarah Pickard (Sorbonne University), Hedi Viterobo (Childhood, Law and Policy Network). Donatella Della Porta and her colleagues at COSMOS (The Centre on Social Movement Studies) along with Maria Grasso (Queen Mary University of London) and Marco Guigni (University of Geneva) also produce important work on gender, youth participation and related topics

Then there is John Wall and colleagues at the Childism Institute at Rutgers University doing terrific work studying and advocating for young people's political participation.

Rys Farthing's work on children's rights, young people's privacy and digital technology is also invaluable. I also find work by Tanu Biswas (University of Stavanger) refreshing and helpful. There are many I have not identified.

The work of some philosophers and theorists who, while they do not specifically focus on gender and youth participation, are nonetheless very helpful for helping to better understand the intersections of gender and youth participation. I have in mind writers like Jacques Ran-

ciere, Michel Serres, Charles Taylor, Hannah Arendt, Rosi Braidotti and Axel Honneth to name but a few.

**Q. What are the key gaps in research on gender and youth participation that you believe need urgent attention?**

A. There are a number of "gaps" or areas where more work is needed.

We need good evidence-based accounts and assessments of so-called youth participation projects in which governments and NGOs claim to encourage children and young people in genuine participatory exercises but which are nothing of the kind. Such research should also consider the harms that these exercises cause to young people and to "our" "democratic political culture" by what are youth participation projects which are primarily about the governance of young people while giving an impression young people are participating.

We also need more good empirical, theoretically and practical work that shows what good youth participation and good youth participation policy looks like.

We need more good research about how many countries are experiencing an educational crisis with issues of school engagement as increasing numbers of young people discover that the school culture and more particularly the curriculum is not for them. Many form this view in a context of increased employment precarity, mounting higher education-based debt and explosive income and wealth inequality that few governments acknowledge let alone address. We need to know more about these entangled elements of a profound cultural, educational and economic transformation where human capital theory no longer makes much sense -if it ever did. More evidence-based research on the benefits and harms associated with social media is needed. This needs to be done, in conjunction with careful assessments of the value of banning children from social media and the impact of doing that on youth people generally and specifically on their political participation,

Given that many young people are engaged in climate action and engage politically with a range of other "issues of the day", attention needs to be given to practices of criminalisation of young people's politics. In some countries young people engaged in climate action and other kinds of issues are killed or "disappeared". We need more research on the criminalisation of climate protest and a better appreciation of the implications of the quashing of dissent expressed by young people about issues such as war, genocide, immigration, gendered violence, and religiously based violence directed at women and members of the LGTBQIA+ communities.

On a more global basis we need to be able to think better what about intergenerational justice looks like in the Anthropocene, and how to achieve it.

Finally, it is also important to think about what an alternative post-anthropocentric ontology might look like and the role of young people in helping to create that.

**Q. How can future youth-led movements ensure inclusivity and gender equity in their organizing structures and goals?**

A. Working to ensuring inclusivity and gender equity in youth led movements depends on the capacity of the leaders and “rank and file members” need to work recognise that all participants in those movements whether they be young, and female are capable as autonomous political agents who are of equal value and deserve equal respect to every other person in the collective. This recognition then needs to inform how participants act and interact individually and collectively on a daily basis and in every activity. We should never assume that just because participants are young and female they are somehow immune from ageism and other kinds of prejudices and harmful practices.

This entails avoiding denial or self-deception about discriminatory and unjust behaviours by people which can also occur amongst those who consider themselves progressive.

We are after all, all human.

In my view what this means, amongst other things, is that participants in such a movement need to be mindful of the value of *reflexive practice* (in the Bourdieusian sense). Engaging in reflexive practice can help ensure that any political interventions are directed towards clearly articulated goods, and that in pursuing those ends the people involved display qualities or virtues like kindness, good judgment, and courage. This requires having clarity of purpose in respect to the action being taken and thinking about how what we do is aligned with our political and ethical positions.

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